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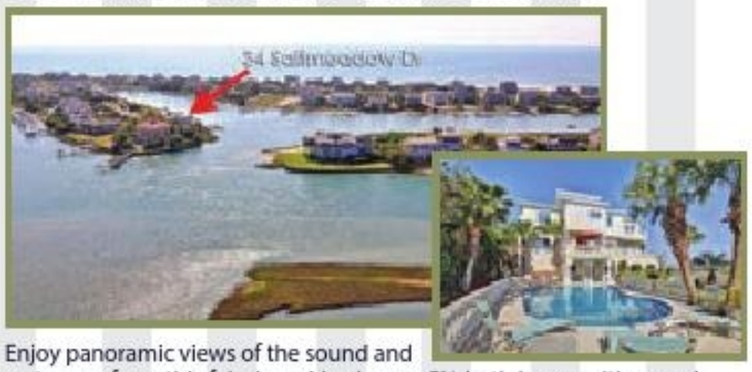

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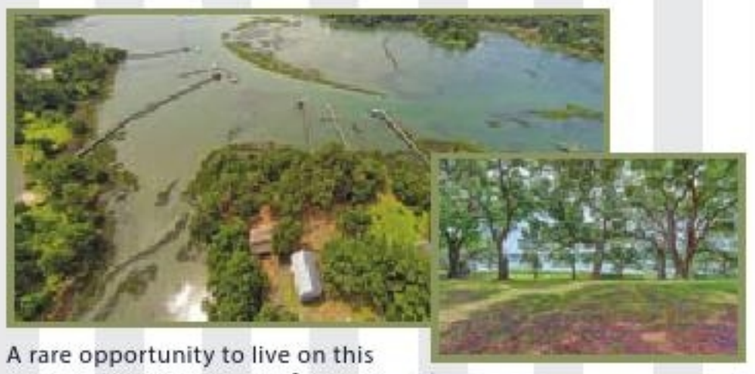

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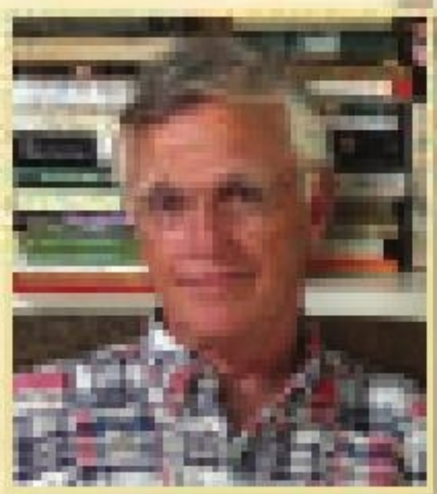

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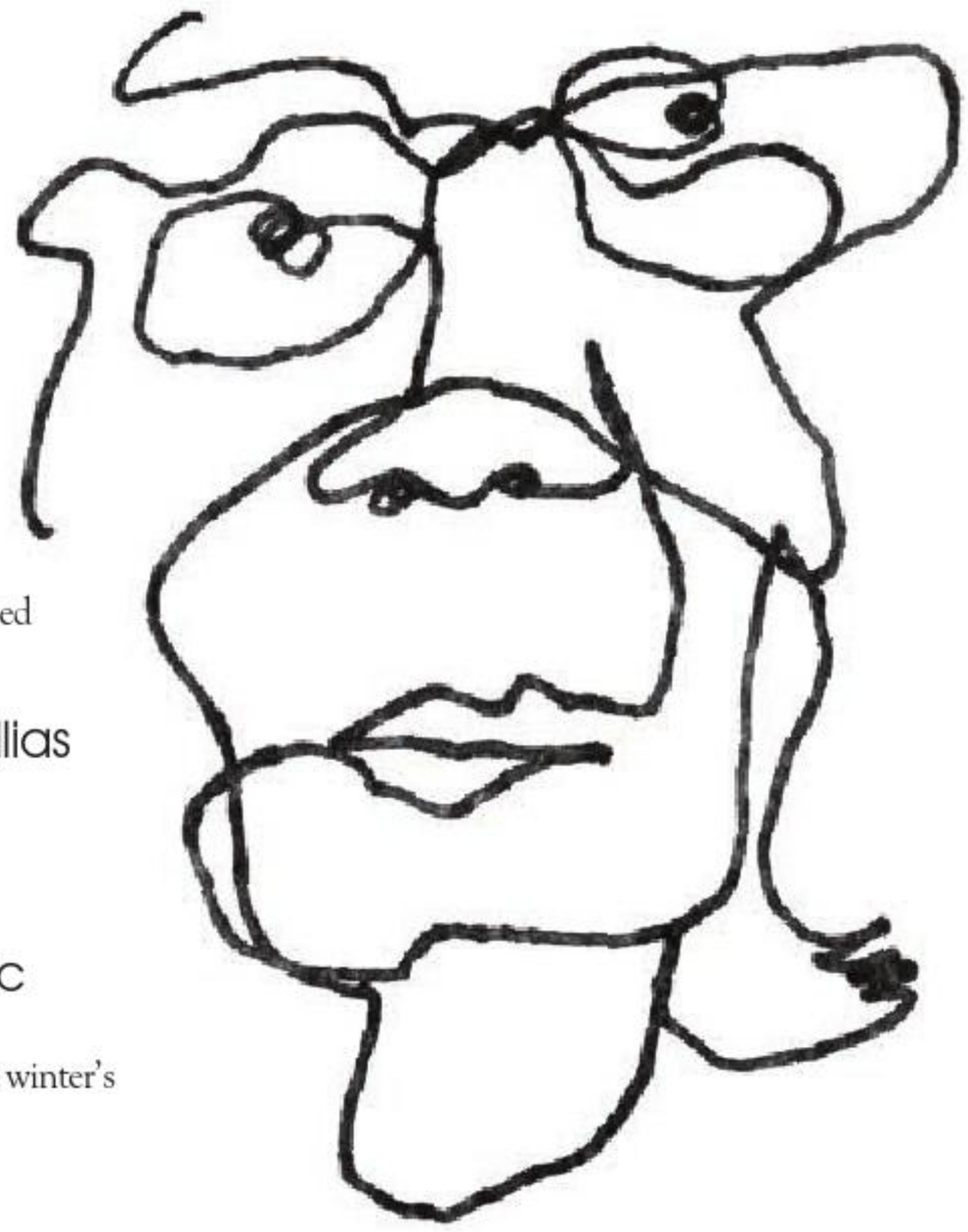

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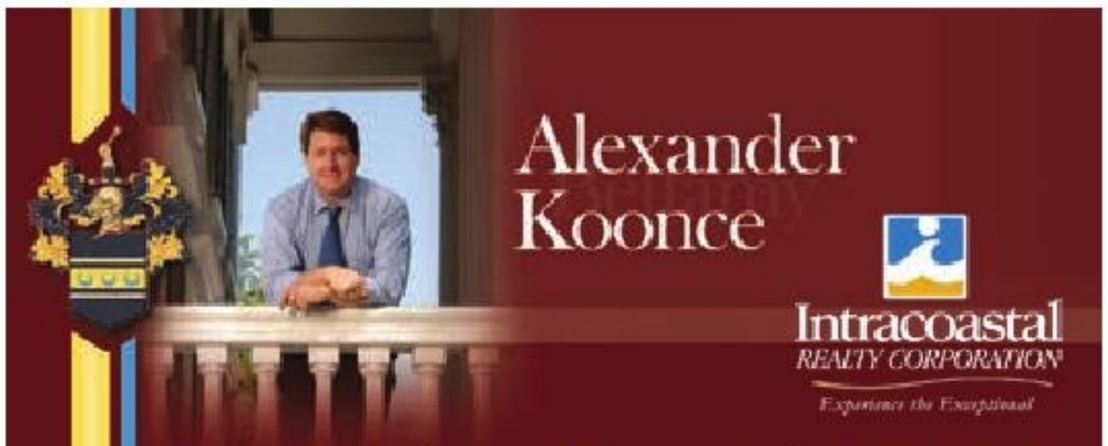

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Growing Older

By Jim Dodson

There are two great days in a person's life, Mark Twain said — the day we were born and the day we figure out why.

Like it or not, once a year, everyone gets a birthday. It's one of life's few ironclad guarantees.

For some, a birthday is an excellent reason to push back the rug, open something bubbly and be toasted by your friends. For others, it's simply a good reason to retreat to the nearest wing chair and open a good book until the moment quietly passes, hoping no one pays much attention. "I've outgrown my need for birthdays," a sprightly friend who recently turned 90 cheerfully confided not long ago. "At this point, I'm just looking forward to a nice weekend."

For better or worse, when it comes to celebrating birthdays — one of which I have this month, as it happens — I tend to fall somewhere between these social extremes: pleased that I've notched another year of good health (knock wood) and service to those around me (knock wood again) but no longer someone who needs, or even desires, a birthday party in his honor. For better or worse, wing chairs mean far more to me these days than wing dings.

Since about age 40, in fact, birthdays — like every item on life's crowded calendar — seem to come whizzing around again with the startling swiftness of tax day. Looking back from the milepost of threescore years, I'd scarcely gotten adjusted to cracking 50 before I was suddenly 52 and feeling powerfully nostalgic and not a little worried that only five minutes ago I was a giddy 40-year-old and first-time father cradling a pink and wiggly newborn in my hands, with a second one soon to follow.

Now (and this is almost dizzying to accept) that beautiful wiggly newborn just turned 26, her kid brother is 24, and both live in Brooklyn, building admirable lives and making their fortunes in a city that never sleeps.

Back here in the provinces, meanwhile, as of the second day of this month — Groundhog Day to the wider world, a day when a cantankerous, overweight rodent is expected to forecast winter's end and spring's arrival — yet another birthday has come with alarming celerity and their old man fields all sorts of bad jokes and silly cards from well-meaning friends and colleagues about seeing his shadow, all meant in the spirit of good clean furry fun, my having finally made peace with life's brevity but mildly wondering where all the time went? How quickly *tempus* really did *fugit*.

To many people, including this aging ground hog, the unsettling feeling that life speeds dramatically up as you age — summers that pass in a blur, Christmas decorations that seem to go up only weeks after they came down — is a very real phenomenon and apparently quite commonplace among all of us as we age. Theories abound why.

When you're very young, the most prominent theory goes, the passage of a single day, week or even a year represents a larger percentage of your life than later years, hence "time" is stretched out, accounting for the relative slowness with which the hours seem to pass. Mathematically speaking, this explains why when you're a sprout, quiet summer days can seem a small eternity, while Christmas takes its own sweet time coming. As cold theories go, this sounds remarkably logical — though in fact there's not a lot of truth to it.

According to folks unlocking the last frontiers of brain science, neurologists and geriatric psychologists and such, the real answer to this riddle lies purely in our brains, not our clocks, located in the realm of human perception and that portion of the brain researchers say is responsible for recording new experiences and emotions, setting down the vivid details of life as they happen, accumulating memories and forming impressions as the years unfold.

In a nutshell, when you're young, new experiences make a strong impression upon your raw perceptions of reality, stimulating the brain's ability to record and process every small detail, and thus "time" appears to pass slowly as data is collected. As the brain matures and life becomes more routine, generally speaking, only fresh experiences or peak events (getting married, meeting your sports hero, visiting Tahiti, winning an Oscar) tend to highlight the passage of years, like distance markers on a memory highway. Other events flicker before us as if from the scrapbook of our lives — blurring memory with life as we age — thus speeding up the passage of time. One notable exception to this phenomenon that proves the rule involves individuals who live through some variation of a life-altering event (car crash, death of a loved one, earthquake, divorce) and often describe "time standing still" during such trials as their brain works overtime to record the details of what is happening.

"Time is a rubbery thing," notes neuroscientist David Eagleman. "It stretches out when you really turn your brain resources on, and when you say, 'Oh, I got this, everything is as expected,' it [time] shrinks up."

Which, in part, explains why many older folks — even those suffering from Alzheimer's and dementia — seem to dwell in the past. They often hang onto amazing details from their earliest days, even as the sands of their hourglass dwindle, recalling distant events with startling clarity, almost as if "it happened just yesterday," as my own mother used to say even as mild dementia ravaged her short-term memory.

In other words, by the time you're, say, 40 or 50 or 60, you've basically seen

ILLUSTRATION BY KIRA SCHOENFELDER

and done it all (or think you have) and most of your furry groundhog days are so ruled by devotion to familiar routines of work and play, time literally flies past without us bothering to notice.

The researchers say that the cure for altering this perception — slowing down the illusion of time's inexorable flight, if you will — is to consciously alter the routines of daily life, adding fresh experiences that stir the soul and stimulate the brain and deepen one's perception of the "here and now." That way we revive time's remarkable elastic ability to record different experiences and form new insights, awakening one's awareness of moments as they arrive, something mystics, wise grannies and baseball philosophers have understood for millennia. "Age is a case of mind over matter," observed one Leroy Robert "Satchel" Paige, the fireballing African-American pitcher who made his Major League debut pitching for the Cleveland Indians at age 42 in 1948. "If you don't mind, it don't matter." Paige pitched brilliantly in the bigs until age 47, appearing in three All Star games.

Satchel helped break the color barrier in American sports. Sophocles wrote new plays into extreme old age. Cicero took up learning to play the lyre in his 80s. Da Vinci's most celebrated works and scientific breakthroughs came in his dotage. Astronomer, mathematician and philosopher Galileo Galilei was an old man approaching his 70th birthday when a papal court condemned and excommunicated him for the heresy of defending his view that the sun — not the earth — was the center of the universe. It only took the Catholic church another five centuries to issue an apology for its divine error in judgment.

"Age, toward which you draw amid the storms of life," wrote the Renaissance poet and scholar Petrarch to his anxious friends and former pupils near the end of his life, eight centuries before Satchel Paige came to the same conclusion, "is nothing so dreadful. Those who call it so have found all stages of life unwelcome, thanks to their mishandling of life, not a particular age. The latter years of a learned, modest man are sheltered and serene. He has appeased the storms within his breast, he has left behind the reefs of strife and labor, he is protected as by a ring of sunny hills from outer storms. So go securely and do not delay. A harbor opens where you feared a shipwreck."

As I've learned from sixty-two Groundhog Days, time may indeed fly, but it also deepens things, including one's appreciation for the onward journey. As your legs weaken, your perception of living in a world that is as flawed as it is beautiful and your ability to notice what makes us all so human, given half a chance and mind open to new experiences, really does gain strength as the days pass away.

Perhaps as a result of this unexpected gift (one of life's greatest unadvertised compensations, I think) the very idea of *growing older* doesn't rattle me one bit, and quite the contrary advances the possibility — certainly the importance — that one may somehow grow in both stature and wisdom as we age and mellow, enjoying the opportunity to acquire the grace and perspective to accept life on its own terms instead of imposing our wills and agendas on people and circumstances.

The older I get, for example, the more I'm pleasantly surprised to discover that I'm far less judgmental about a million little things [insert annoyance here] and find myself worrying less and less about death and where and how I'll end my journey than how I choose to spend the precious hours of whatever time I have remaining, enriching my own days by giving more and needing less.

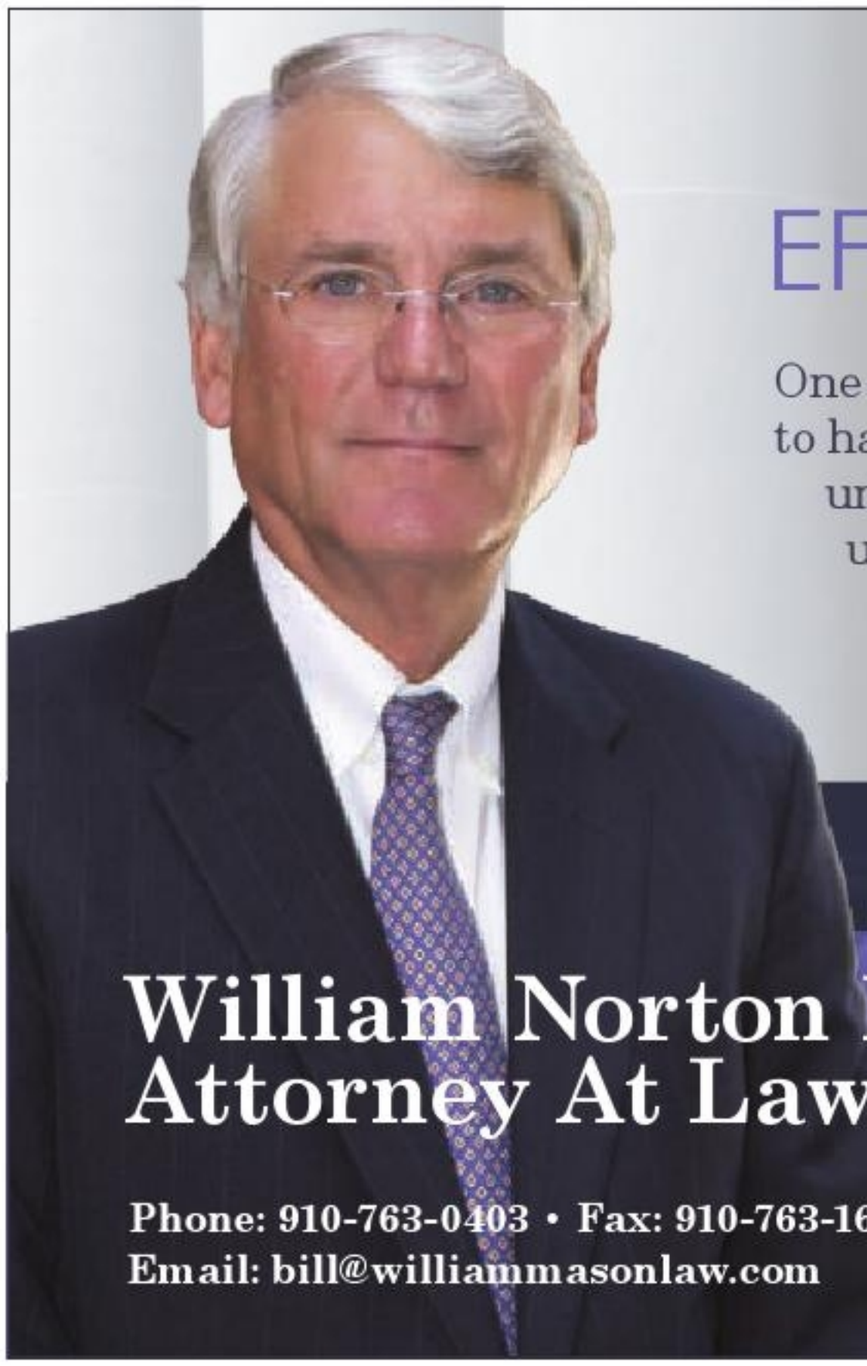
Like T.S. Eliot's Prufrock, who grew "old and old" and wore the bottoms of his trousers rolled, I find my tastes have become surprisingly simpler, perhaps an echo of the farming race I hail from. One way or another, as I grow closer again to the earth, I find the landscape of home and place means more than I ever imagined it would when I set off four decades ago to see what was over the horizon.

So for my birthday this year, I plan to take a nice long walk with my wife and the dogs through a winter-brown field and maybe plant a couple of river birches in my yard.

The definition of an optimist, my father told me many decades ago, is a fellow who plants a tree so late in his life he knows he'll never be able to sit beneath it.

Growing older helps you understand what such a gift really means. Besides, river birches grow rather quickly.

Contact editor Jim Dodson at jim@saltmagazinenc.com.



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Laugh Till It Hurts

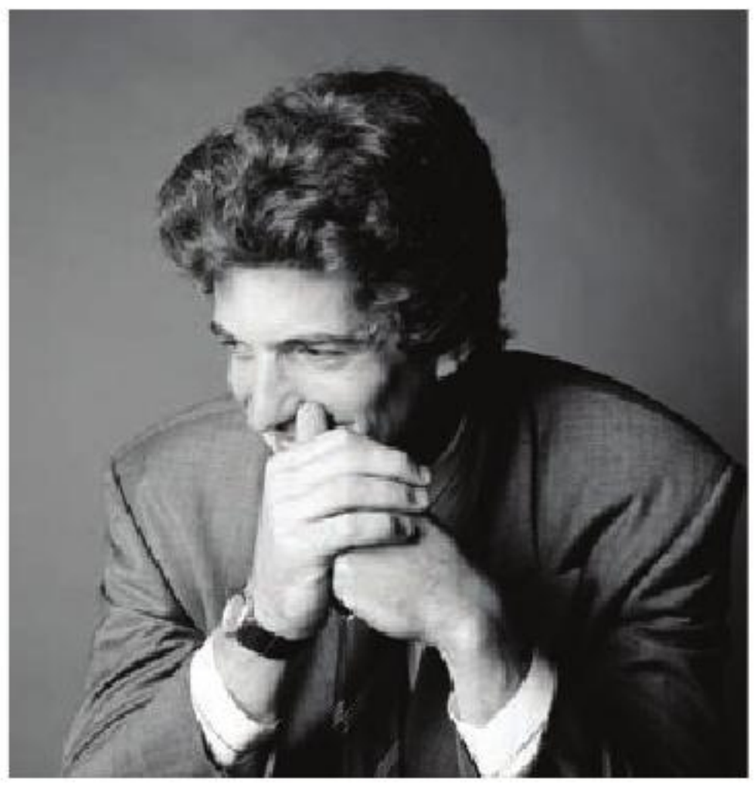
At the touch of love, said Plato, everyone becomes a poet. Perhaps you agree. Or perhaps you're more inclined to view love in terms of Murphy's Law, an inevitable fact of life generously sprinkled with conflict and quarrels. Flowery or not, such tiffs often beget laughter, which is why many will find *Love Happens* particularly amusing — the play hits home. Rich Orloff's romantic comedy follows a year in the lives of two couples, one beginning their relationship, the other approaching their fiftieth anniversary. As the younger couple progresses from meeting and dating to the challenges of living together and commitment, they get advice and testimony from the older couple, who develop problems of their own when they're influenced by the younger pair. While the actors hash things out on stage, you can chow down on grilled mahi, chicken marsala or potato gnocchi, but do be sure to save room for the chocolate almond truffle cake. Show not appropriate for children. Runs Friday and Saturday, February 6–7 and 13–14, 7 p.m. Doors open at 6 p.m. Tickets: $30 (dinner and show); $20 (show only). Four-course Valentine's night special menu: $80/couple. See website for details. TheatreNOW, 19 South Tenth Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 399-3669 or www.theatrewilmington.com.

She Said, She Said

The UNCW Women's Studies and Resource Center and the Women's Studies Student Association partner with Wilmington's Carousel Center for Abused Children and Coastal Horizon's Rape Crisis Center to bring two benefit productions of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* to the stage as part of the global V-Day movement to end violence and raise awareness and money for local organizations that empower women and children. Written in 1996, this award-winning episodic play has been translated into nearly fifty languages and performed in over 140 countries, and has starred the likes of Jane Fonda, Oprah Winfrey, Susan Sarandon and Whoopie Goldberg. On Thursday, February 12, at 7 p.m., and Sunday, February 15, at 2 p.m., a student and staff cast will deliver the many aspects of the feminine experience. Laugh, cry and feel empowered with them. Tickets: $10; $8/student. UNCW Lumina Theater, Fisher Student Center, 651 South College Road. Info: uncw.edu/lumina.

A Whistling Mother

One long look at the famous painting likened to a Victorian *Mona Lisa* suggests that the subject is a woman with many secrets — like that she lived in Czarist Russia and ran the blockade at Charleston during the Civil War. On Sunday, February 8, at 3 p.m., Dr. Kemille Moore, associate interim dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at UNCW, will share fascinating details about the life and escapades of Anna McNeil Whistler, mother of artist James McNeil Whistler, during "Tea with Whistler's Mother," an educational program presented by the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society. English afternoon tea to follow. Cost: $25, includes Victorian treats. Proceeds help fund future educational programs. Latimer House, 126 South Third Street, Wilmington. Reservations: (910) 762-0492. Info: www.lcfhs.org.



Brownie Points

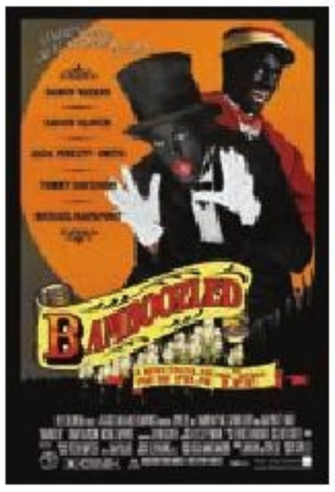
Having spent 30-plus years roving the world on assignment, Wilmington-based commercial, portrait and industrial photographer Brownie Harris has created what some might consider to be the Holy Grail of portfolios. His most famous subjects include Paul Newman, Carly Simon, Miles Davis, Andy Warhol, John F. Kennedy Jr., and James Earl Jones, but his portraits of pig farmers, factory workers and bright-eyed youth are equally gripping. On Friday, February 27, from 6–9 p.m., Cape Fear Community College's Wilma W. Daniels Gallery will hold a closing reception for *Brownie Harris: A 45 Year Retrospective*, a solo exhibition which highlights four areas of Brownie's work: portraits, Bromoils, dance and industrial. His unassuming and respectful approach to all subjects paired with his expert ability to bring a subject to life through lighting and composition are evident throughout the exhibition. See for yourself. Regular gallery hours are Tuesdays through Thursdays, 12–5 p.m.; Fridays from 12–3:30 p.m. Exhibition runs through March 13. Wilma W. Daniels Gallery, 200 Hanover Street, Wilmington. Info: cfcc.edu/blogs/wilmagallery.

PHOTOGRAPHS: BROWNIE HARRIS, LOIS GREENFIELD, BILL WESTMORELAND

Flowery Language

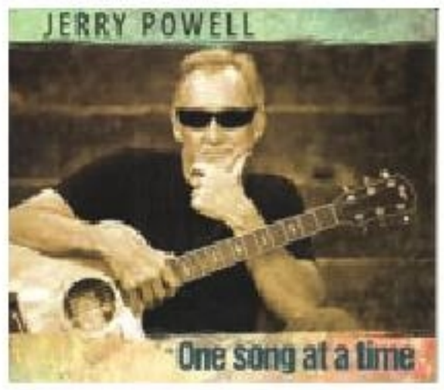
On pages 64–66, you may be surprised to learn the royal history of the flowering plant oft-known as the rose of winter. Crowning glory of a proper Southern garden, this kaleidoscopic beauty takes center stage at the 65th Annual Tidewater Camellia Club Show on Saturday, February 28, from 1–5 p.m. Exhibitors from all over the southeastern United States will display over 1,000 blooms — each distinct from the next — for evaluation by American Camellia Society judges. See if you can pick the winners. Camellias available for purchase beginning at 9 a.m.; no charge to stop and smell the flowers. New Hanover County Arboretum, 6206 Oleander Drive, Wilmington. Info: (910) 509-1792 or www.tidewatercamelliaclub.org.

BYOP



New Hanover County Public Library's Black History Film Festival will feature a free film showing at NHC Main Library at 2 p.m. each Sunday in February. Honoring outstanding African-American directors — Gordon Parks, Ossie Davis, Maya Angelou and Spike Lee — the festival includes the first major studio feature film directed by an African-American (February 1); a comedy starring Redd Foxx, Cleavon Little and Judy Pace (February 8); a gripping family drama (February 15); and a satire about a frustrated African-American TV writer who proposes a blackface minstrel show in protest of entertainment industry racism (February 22). Mature themes. See the Library's online calendar for film titles. BYOP (Bring Your Own Popcorn). To learn more about New Hanover County's four public library buildings and extensive online resources, which include subscriptions to the African American Experience and American Slavery databases as well as streaming video from Films on Demand and Indieflix, call (910) 798-6301 or visit www.nhclibrary.org. For more information about the Black History Film Festival, contact Librarian Carla Sarratt at (910) 798-6341. Main Library, 201 Chestnut Street, Wilmington. Info: www.nhclibrary.org

Songbird



For decades, acoustic guitarist and vocalist Jerry Powell played in various bands, covering the songs of his musical influences — Neil Young, Eric Clapton, Tom Petty, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, the Allman Brothers and The Beatles — "but I was a closet songwriter," he says. His second solo album, *One Song at a Time*, is proof. With twelve original songs, including one by friend and local musician Mike Adams, Powell's latest touches on love and loss, but listen closer. "Mariella" and "Emmie Mae" weren't inspired by old flings. They're love songs for his granddaughters. While it's clear that Powell draws inspiration from his own life experiences, "The Ballad of Franz and Sophie" tells the true story of an archduke and a countess whose secret love affair came with devastating consequences. All tracks were recorded in Powell's home studio near Wrightsville Beach and mastered by Ed Quidley. An album release party will be held on Friday, February 13. Of course, says Powell, he still enjoys performing some of those classic covers. Sweet n Savory Cafe, 1611 Pavilion Place, Wilmington. Info: jerrypowellmusic.com.

Little Girl Blue

Roses are nice. Chocolates, too. But if you're looking for a more soulful way to say "Be Mine," try snagging a pair of tickets to Natalie Douglas' critically acclaimed tribute to Nina Simone, a pre-Valentine's Day jazz concert that makes Cupid's arrow seem, well, sorta dull. On Wednesday, February 11, at 7:30 p.m, seven-time MAC (Manhattan Association of Cabarets and Clubs) award-winner Natalie Douglas will deliver her own honeyed vocals for a don't-miss-it performance that will make your very soul sing. "Nina Simone was one of the extraordinary storytellers of our time," says Douglas. "Her passion, fire, humor, anger, love and profound musical mastery echo in my heart and mind." As they will yours. Tickets: $18 (gallery); $26–32 (dress circle and parquet). Thalian Hall Main Stage, 310 Chestnut Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 632-2285 or www.thalianhall.org.

Think Local, Y'all

Feast Down East, also known as the Southeastern NC Food Systems Program, is a nonprofit economic development program that aims to build a strong local food system and alleviate poverty in rural and urban communities by helping small scale limited-resource farmers build and sustain their farms and connecting them with local markets. Sound like something you want to know more about? The fifth annual Feast Down East Regional Conference is your golden opportunity. On Friday, February 6, from 8 a.m. – 4 p.m., over twenty workshops allow you to learn more about community gardens, solar energy, drip irrigation, sustainable practices and more. Opening keynote address by Jennifer MacDougall, Healthy Active Communities Senior Program Officer of Blue Cross Blue Shield of NC Foundation; Randall Gore, USDA State Director of NC Rural Development, will share updates and resources for the "NC StrikeForce Initiative" during a seasonal, homegrown lunch. Admission: $15–30. UNCW Burney Center, 601 South College Road, Wilmington. Info: www.feastdowneast.org/conference.html.

A Tale of Magic

According to ancient pagan lore, the high energy of a full moon makes it the most powerful time for magical workings. Whether or not you agree, you won't want to miss Aquila Theatre's interpretation of *The Tempest*, to be performed on Tuesday, February 3, at 7 p.m., when the moon is plump and the night is a place of mystery and enchantment. Believed to be Shakespeare's final play, *The Tempest* is infused with magic, the supernatural and heightened suspense. The story details the revenge efforts of the Duke of Milan, usurped and exiled by his own brother and stranded on a mystical island with his daughter, Miranda. With an ensemble of superb performers, this highly acclaimed British-American touring company brings innovative style and a dynamic physical approach to the famous magical tale of forgiveness and enlightenment. Tickets: $30; $5/students. Kenan Auditorium, 601 South College Road, Wilmington. Box Office: (800) 732-3643. Info: uncw.edu/presents/uncwpresentsAquilaTheatre.html.

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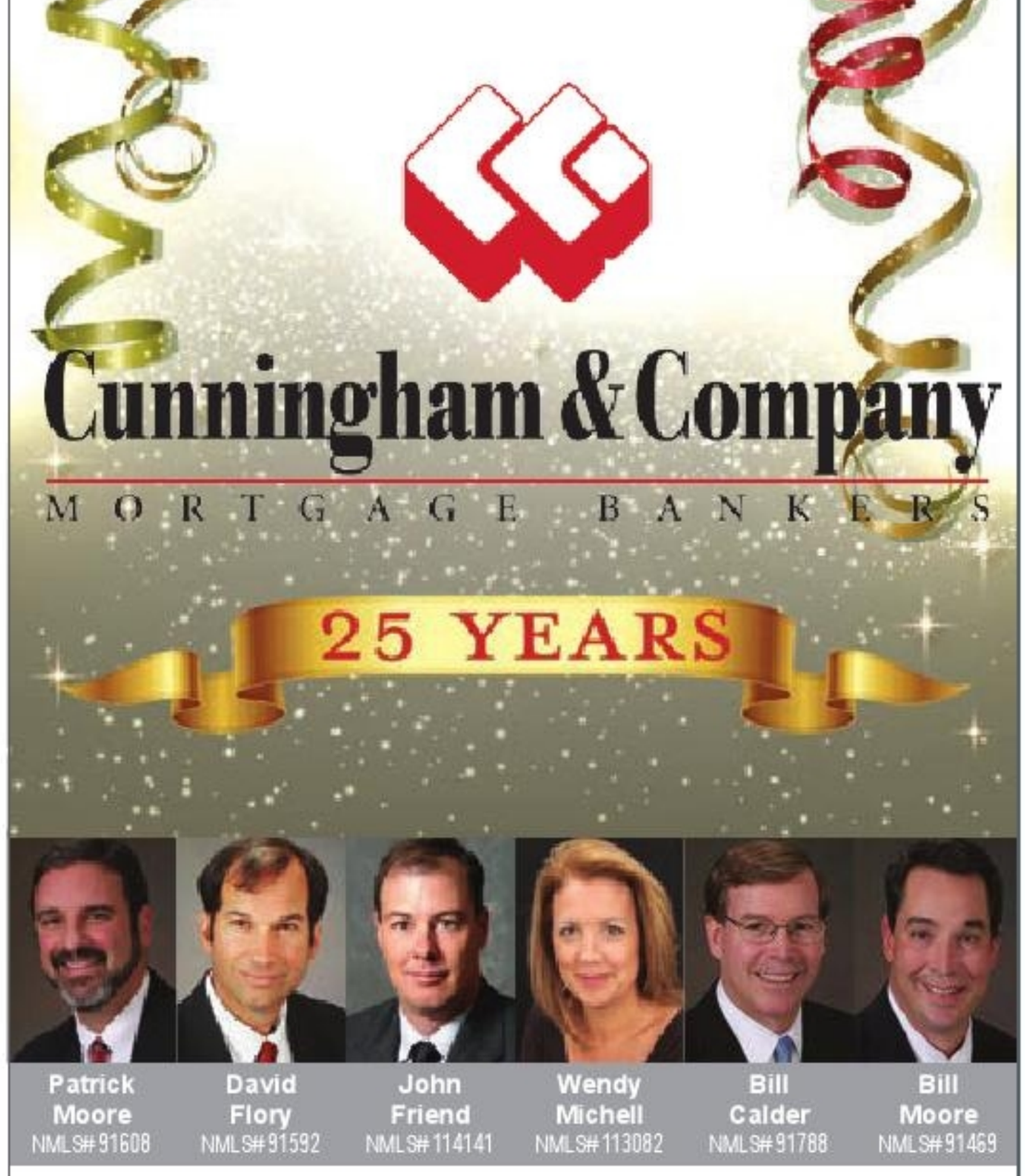

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Wilmington Visitor's Buraeu
Waterford Sales Center
Wells Fargo
Wine and Design
Wrightsville Beach Museum

Rainy Day Romance

The quiet of a gray winter day, spiced cocoa and a blues-playing pawnbroker

By Ashley Wahl

The wintry sky is the same dull gray as the pavement, and a patchy drizzle makes middle distance look like an old slide show. Some call this weather dreary, but the muted backdrop excites you, makes you want to go someplace new, hold space with strangers, open yourself to the romance of everyday life.

You recall that unassuming storefront coffee shop across from the CITGO on Wrightsville Avenue and think you might go there, where the coffee is locally roasted and tubes of hemp lip balm line the checkout counter alongside baskets of purse-sized Nag Champa hand lotions. You envision a cozy space filled with mindful people nursing mugs of spiced chai, reading dog-eared paperbacks, listening to music, or, like you, simply hoping for a trace of mystery on this dreamy winter afternoon.

Something about the weather seems to heighten your awareness, like the brilliant flash of a cardinal on a leafless periphery.

*

On the drive to Grinders Caffè, tires sloshing across rain-fringed blacktop, a brilliant flash of red text on an electronic sign causes you to make an unanticipated stop: acoustic guitars for $58.

You don't play guitar, but here you are, at National Pawn, staring at a wall of them. You admire their shapely figures and decorative inlays, sliding your finger down the fretboard of the one that speaks to you. As the sound resonates, you notice a Rogue mandolin (good as new) and an Alvarez Minstrel banjo and imagine a couple of bright-eyed kids taking them back to their dorm rooms, becoming the next Shovels and Rope.

Back toward the fishing poles and scuff marked surfboards, college boys stand before a display of electric guitars as if worshiping at a sacred altar.

"Dude, check this out," says the one in plaid.

"Dude, it's a signature series," says the other, who begins playing air guitar, sound effects included.

Among the musical treasures: turntables, bongos, Yamaha keyboards, picks, amps, cymbals, flutes, and behind one of the glass display cases, an entire wall of brass and woodwinds.

Pawnbroker Anthony Ellis, who could pass for a young Cannonball Adderley, knows a thing or two about this wall. He reaches for what he calls a "student brand" alto saxophone complete with a rare high F sharp key.

"This one's good for beginners," he says, noting the price. "For most band students, a new one would cost six . . . seven hundred dollars."

At $219, this one is a steal.

Plus, there's that rare key, "although most beginners wouldn't need or be able to hit it," says Ellis, who knows because he's been playing sax since age 9. Turns out, he was even a saxophone major at UNCW.

"It's my mom's favorite instrument," he says in response to why he chose it.

A young man approaches the counter with electric guitar in hand.

"I think I'm going to buy this," he says to Ellis. "How much? I only have $200."

Ellis has an air as smooth as jazz.

"We'll make it work."

*

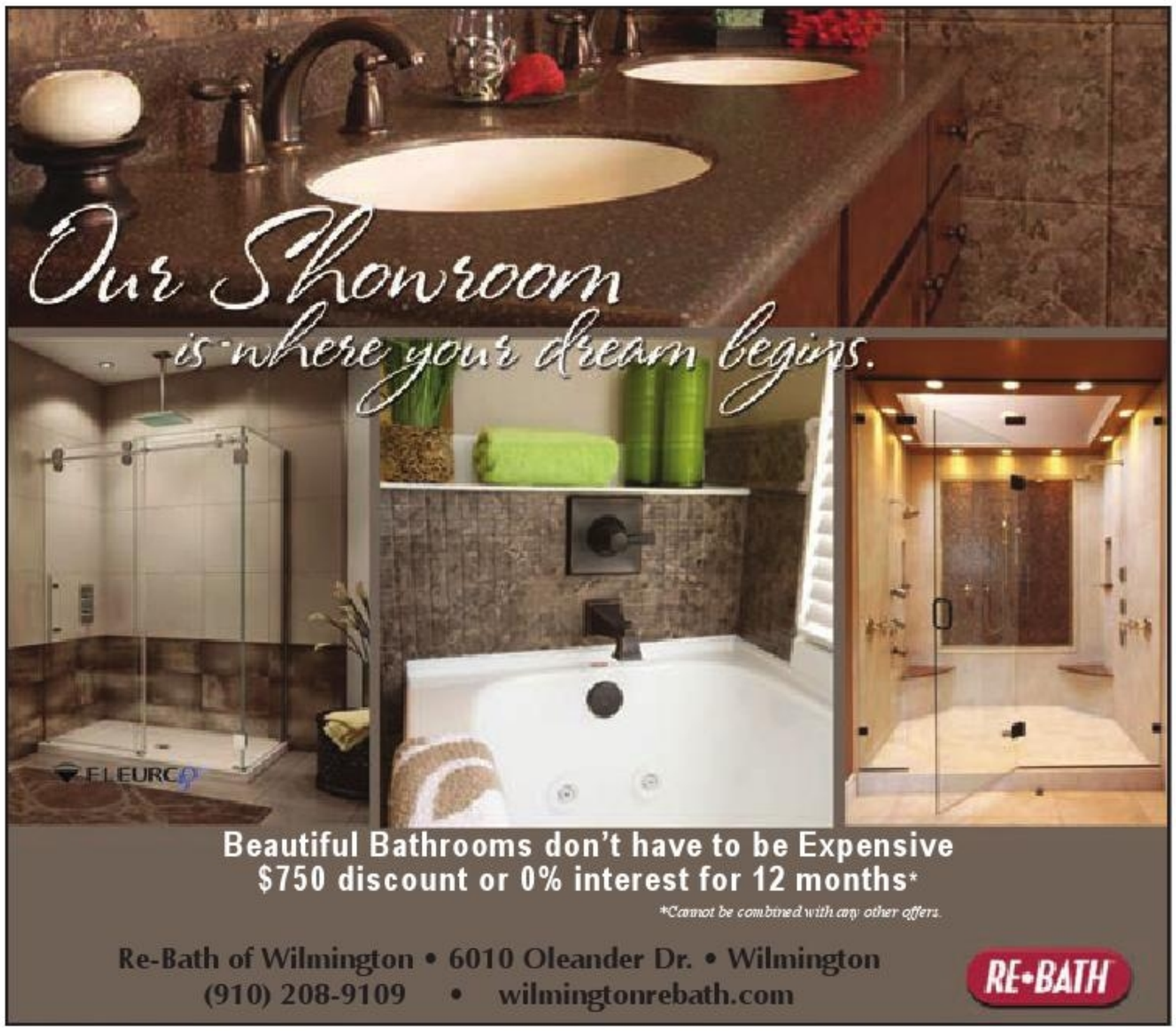
At Grinders, located beside Jae's Alterations and a guitar shop you've never noticed before (Tony's), a couple in fleece-lined flannel order Mexican mochas, and perfect strangers talk about rescue dogs and urban chickens and Thursday's open mic.

You order a spicy cocoa too, notice the student with the open book scrolling through his smartphone, then look out toward the gray landscape where an occasional pedestrian ambles by along the puddled sidewalk.

The Civil Wars are streaming through the shop's speakers, and a giant poster of Stevie Ray Vaughn reminds you that there is talent all around you, like the blues-playing pawnbroker or the friendly barista or the woman in the fuchsia raincoat whom you haven't spoken with yet.

A silver-haired man in a khaki suit and ball cap orders the house blend, then sits in the booth beside you, his back to the drizzly outdoors. For a few quiet moments, he just sits there. Then, he takes his coffee and moseys onward.

Our spy, senior editor Ashley Wahl, is prone to wander.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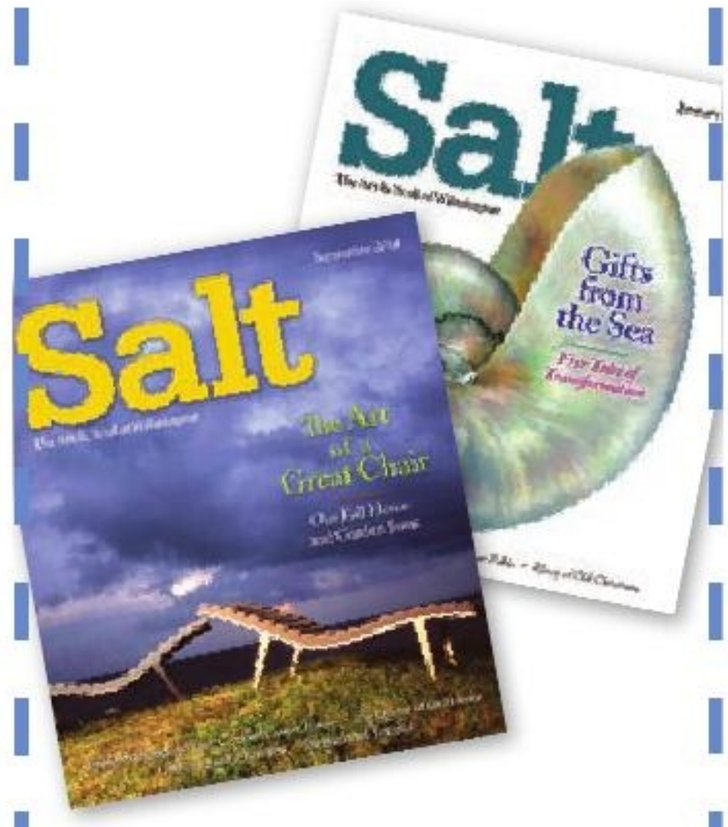

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The Wedding Roast

Sometimes love is just plain funny, and kind of green

By Gwenyfar Rohler

"Welcome to the Dead Crow Comedy Room! Please give it up for the master of ceremonies this evening, Mr. Timmy Sherriiiiiill!" The applause swells, buoying the grinning, lanky Timmy Sherrill to the stage. It could be any show at Dead Crow Comedy Room, the basement bar that is home sweet home to Wilmington's stand-up comedy world. Except, this one's a little bit different.

"How's everybody doing?" Sherrill asks the crowd.

Applause and catcalls erupt.

"How many people have never been to a LIVE wedding ceremony before?"

That's right, it's a wedding at the comedy club. Anthony Corvino and Beth Raynor, known as the George Burns and Gracie Allen of the local comedy scene, are tying the knot complete with a comedy roast as a reception. It's not really a surprise to anyone, except maybe Beth's mom. When I first met the couple two years ago they were talking about their plans to marry at the comedy club "if and when" they did it. The thing is, almost everyone who knows the two of them knew that Corvino was planning to ask Beth to marry him, preferably on stage at open mic night. But the then Nutt Street Comedy Room, which Sherrill operated in conjunction with The Soapbox Laundro-Lounge, closed in the summer of 2013 when The Soapbox shuttered. Sherrill cast about for a new location, hosted shows around town to try to keep the momentum for live comedy going, and after much hard work, announced in the spring of 2014 that Dead Crow Comedy Room would be opening just two doors down from the old Nutt Street location.

Corvino immediately went into a tailspin: He was thrilled the club was reopening, but also trying to work up the nerve to ask Beth. "Do you think she's going to say 'Yes?'" I asked him one day, half teasing.

"She better! I just bought her a house!" Corvino sputtered, the blood draining out of his face.

*

It's a mildly overcast day in October and we are lining up on the back patio of Dead Crow Comedy Club. I'm a "groom's dude" for Anthony and get paired up to walk with Chase Harrison, one of Beth's bridesmaids. The Green Arrow, aka Aaron Gold, one of the other groom's dudes, is having trouble stowing his bow and quiver without accidentally blinding anyone. Beth's favorite color is green, so the wedding party has been told to wear something green . . . hence the comic book hero appearance. Little did we know how handy a superhero would be in the next hours of our lives — but we'll get to that later. The club has been transformed from the usual earth-toned basement bar look. Now, the tables are covered in white sparkly cloths, topped with mints, candles, flowers and mementos with Beth and Anthony's names. Bows and ribbons tastefully accent the doors. It's like a bit of fairytale wonderland sparkles here.

"Dear Beth, Thank you for letting me have my dream wedding . . . You're the only person I know that would agree to get married in a basement." Corvino begins his vows to a round of laughs. "Beth, I love you. And I vow to love you every single day until you die, because I was told I am not allowed to die first." Discussions of late night drives to Taco Bell, *Batman*, and *Doctor Who* figure largely into his vows, as does an indication that Corvino has learned something about the realty of adult relationships: "I vow to be pushy, say what I feel and make any decisions without your input when discussing what to do with the attic, the shed and the side of the house where there may be a grass snake hiding." Corvino winds up the most important comedy set of his life with tears streaking his cheeks and a huge round of applause.

Even if this weren't their wedding, comedy fans across the Port City would expect Beth to follow up the next set — and likely set the record straight on some of Corvino's points. The thing with Beth's comedy work is that she can say some really vulgar, personal things about herself and Corvino, but she looks so sweet and doll-like that your mind doesn't quite process what's going on at first. Her wedding vows are no different, except that after a couple of laughs she settles into the important things she needs to tell Corvino on this day of all days. In less than four minutes she has deftly moved us from laughing to crying. There is not a dry eye in the house.

It's almost starting to look like a "normal" wedding when Sherrill asks, "Is there anyone here, gathered today, that has anything that would not allow . . . ?" He is interrupted by a Lucha wrestler in full mask and costume screaming "I DO! This is no bueno!" He rushes the altar/stage. The groom's dudes swing into action deftly surrounding him. Wills Maxwell, local comedian and right hand to Corvino grabs the microphone and begins narrating the match. Suddenly Beth and Anthony appear with a folding chair and knock him out. "Anyone else?" Sherrill inquires again.

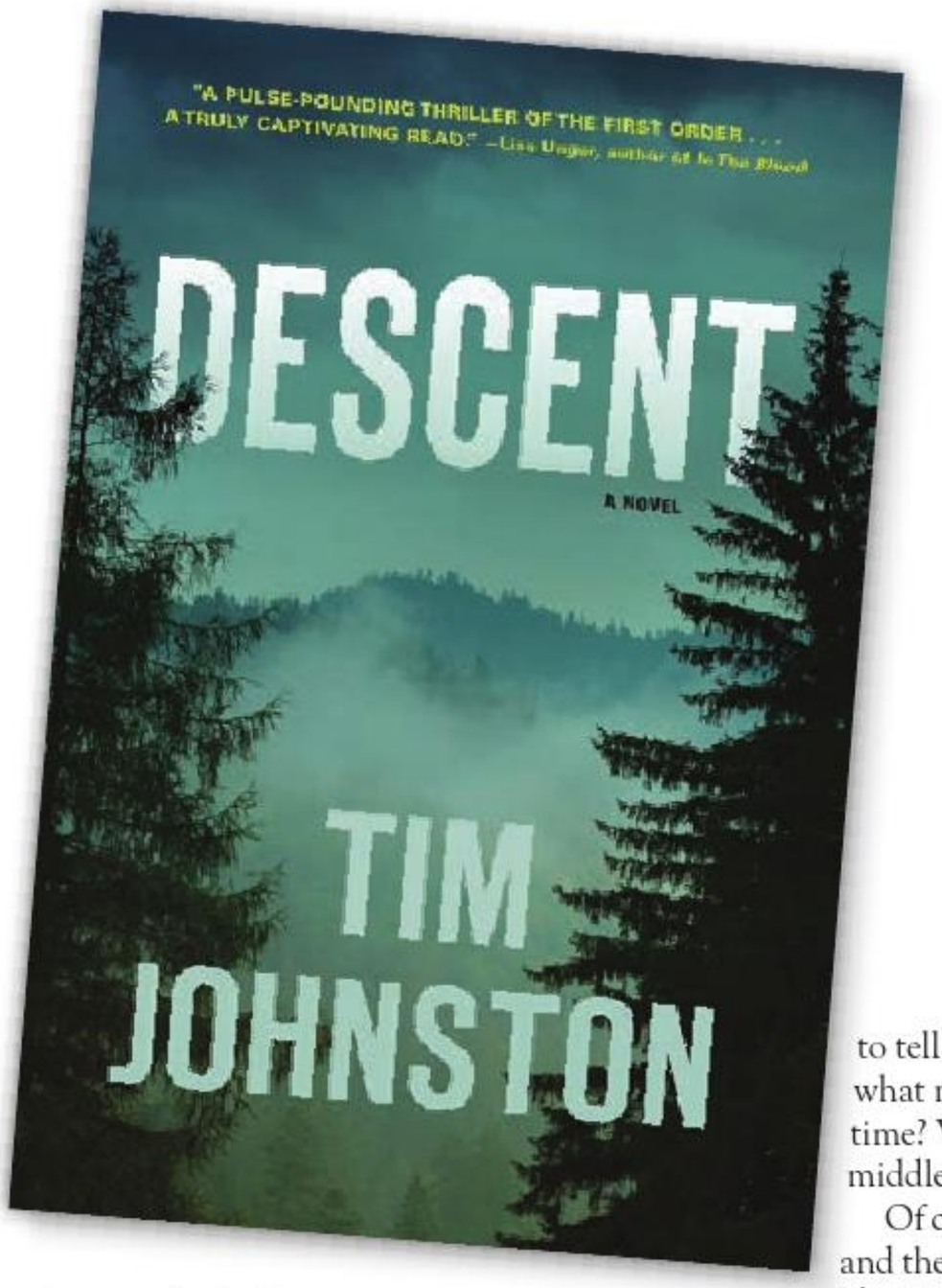
Our young lovers kiss, wave to the audience, and the show ends with a standing ovation.

Gwenyfar Rohler spends her days managing her family's bookstore on Front Street.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK STEELMAN

The Perils of Reading

In Tim Johnston's affecting new novel, Descent, *our deepest longings for the safety of loved ones is brilliantly stirred*


"A PULSE-POUNDING THRILLER OF THE FIRST ORDER . . .
A TRULY CAPTIVATING READ." —Lisa Unger, author of In Too Blood
DESCENT
A NOVEL
TIM
JOHNSTON

By Brian Lampkin

There are novels that I have stopped reading. The reasons are many: I left the book on the train; it was boring; or I simply left it unfinished on the nightstand in the ongoing chaos of daily life. I stopped reading Tim Johnston's new novel, *Descent* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2015, $25.95), over and over again for none of the reasons above. I stopped because it hurt. I stopped because Johnston's writing is exquisite — that is to say his writing is extremely beautiful, but painfully so. *Descent* is a novel that makes you feel too much. You must stop. And go on. Because you understand that this book offers something exceptional.

Which is funny to say because the book is in many ways conventional. It is openly referred to as a "literary thriller" — a genre saturating the book world. It is also centered on the abduction of a young woman. I don't need to tell how familiar that story has become. So what makes it the best novel I've read in a long time? What makes it rise above its seemingly middle-of-the-road ambitions?

Of course I'm asking what makes a book sing and the answer to that question is a great mystery. It's an alchemical mixture of literary elements, but I'll argue here that it's more about language and emotional tone than it is about plot or content. And I think it is the tone of *Descent* that so moves me.

The abduction of 18-year-old Caitlin in the mountains of Colorado and the subsequent search for her — which plays out over years — could easily have become cliché or sensational in the worst way. But Johnston never lets us forget that this real pain (Even though it's not. It's a novel. An act of imagination.) is the pain that Caitlin's family is feeling. It's not a mystery waiting to be satisfactorily solved or a political polemic on the dangers of the world. This is raw anguish and guilt and loss:

"One speck of difference in the far green sameness and he would stare so hard his vision would slur and his heart would surge and he would have to force himself to look away — *Daddy*, she'd said — and he would take his skull in his hands and clench his teeth until he felt the roots giving way and the world would pitch and he would groan like some aggrieved beast and believe he would retch up his guts, organs and entrails and heart and all, all of it wet and gray and steaming at his feet and go ahead, he would say into this blackness, go ahead god damn you."

Maybe that's not everyone's idea of good bedtime reading, but I don't want to undersell Johnston's adeptness with plot and structure. *Descent* is

a page-turner. And it does resolve in an action-filled, cinematic manner, but even then it's not exactly conventional and certainly not predictable. In interviews, Johnston has said that he wanted it all; he wanted to combine all the best elements of a well-plotted thriller with his remarkable writing and emotional sensitivities. Johnston refuses to believe that these are mutually exclusive.

And despite the horrors of this novel, it is sensitive to human feeling in a way that resonates deeply, at least with me. Johnston avoids the sexual depravity that is obviously at the core of the abductor's reason for taking Caitlin. His choice is pitch-perfect; in other writers hands we'd suffer and witness this sexual torture, but Johnston will not exploit his work with that kind of horror.

Strangely, *Descent* is really a book about love. It is about how much we all risk by the simple act of loving someone in a world that can destroy that love in an offhand moment of inattention or in the actions of a depraved individual. The novel swings back and forth between scenes of Caitlin and her abductor and Caitlin's family's search for her and their life without her. The novel asks what are the limits of love, or what are the limits of what can be endured both physically and emotionally for love.

To some extent, we are asked to endure as well. You will need to stop reading. I think the first time I had to put *Descent* down was when Caitlin tried to call her parents just as the abduction was to occur:

"She was smiling, she was crying, already hearing his voice: Hello? Caitlin? Where are you, sweetheart? And then she did hear his voice, deep and steady and familiar in her ear, and though it was only his voice mail she began to sob.

Daddy, she said, before the first blow landed."

As a parent of three daughters, I suppose this novel frightens me directly, but Johnston's empathetic skills surely make this a universally affecting work. Johnston won't be happy to hear me say this, but some people will want to avoid this book. For the rest of us, though, *Descent* will stir our deepest longings for the safety of our loved ones while also thrilling us with a taut and relentlessly tense story. It's early in 2015, but this novel will win awards this year. Now that's never a good reason to read a book. Read *Descent* for its beautiful writing and for its tender care for its characters. Just stop when necessary before returning for more.

Brian Lampkin is an owner of Scuppernong Books in Greensboro, N.C.

A Valentine's Matching Game

(and no fair, ahem, cheating)

Entering a novel is like walking into a restaurant to greet a blind date. You've heard a few things, perhaps encountered a negative review or two, but still you're hopeful that this experience will change your life. Sometimes it's a disaster, but sometimes, and only rarely, you find something you'll spend the rest of your life talking about. For Valentine's Day, we've recreated a dating experience here on the page for you. Marry our review with the appropriate cover image (on page 21), and Kismet!

Good luck.

A) It would be almost impossible to match the careful, lucid woman introduced to the reader at the beginning of this novel with the bank-robbing ne'er-do-well she claims to have been some years earlier. What follows is a story of darkness and light where profound tenderness bumps elbows with unspeakable tragedy.

B) Oh Sal! Oh Dean! This novel is often misunderstood as a precursor to a decade-long American experiment, when it is more accurately the story of two men in love with the sound of each other's voice.

C) The tough-talking wise guys and the hard-as-nails dames of film noir had babies sometime in late '50 and their offspring grew to be this couple. They're sex-addled Bonnie and Clydes, sliding their way through a crazy world that understands them even less than they understand themselves, trying not to explode from their love and the sheer wild joy they take in each other.

D) On the other end of the romantic spectrum, this novel is an intense and unsparing portrait of a woman struggling to cope in the weeks after the break-up of her marriage. It's a book about losing yourself altogether and attempting to reassemble it piece by piece, written by a celebrated though anonymous author who might be a woman, or might not.

E) This 2015 novel tries to destroy love and nearly succeeds. Taut, chilling – our early vote for the best novel of the year. When dealing with painful, terrible acts in writing, tone becomes the real indicator of a writer's intention. This writer is a master of tone and tension, and sometimes safety is at the bottom of a mountain of snow.

F) How wrong we are to think of gay love as a modern invention. This book makes clear the long and lovely history of finding the true partner for your private aching heart.

G) And finally, in the end, aren't we after something more lasting than romantic love? Isn't there someone out there, no matter how odd, who understands you deeply despite vast differences? This book values the unexpected kindnesses of a good companion.

Write your answers here

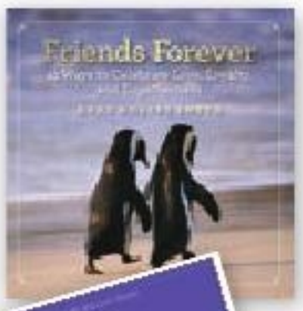
A)_____ E)_____

B)_____ F)_____

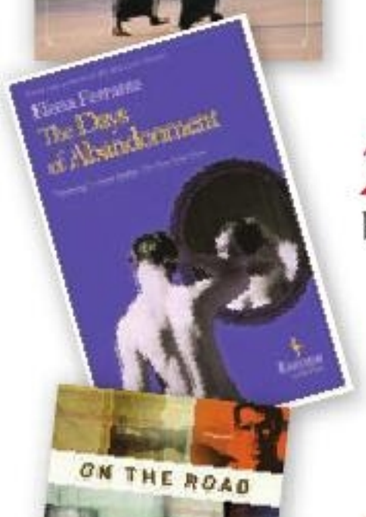
C)_____ G)_____

D)_____

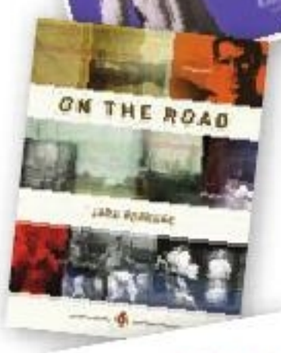
BOOKSHELF



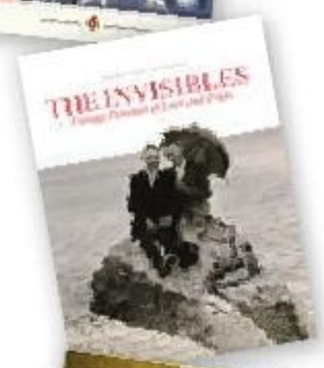
1) *Friends Forever: 42 Ways to Celebrate Love, Loyalty and Togetherness*, by Anne Rogers Smyth



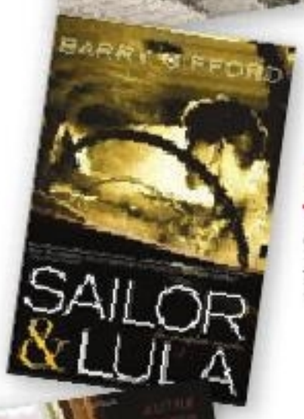
2) *Days of Abandonment*, by Elena Ferrante



3) On *The Road*, by Jack Kerouac

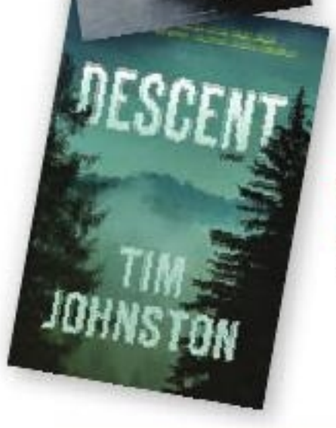


4) *The Invisibles: Vintage Portraits of Love and Pride*, by Sebastian Lifshit



5) *Sailor & Lula: The Complete Novels*, by Barry Gifford

6) *Little Lumpen Novelita*, by Roberto Bolano



7) *Descent*, by Tim Johnston

Key:
A = 6, B = 3, C = 5, D = 2, E = 7, F = 4, G = 1

Our friends in Greensboro sent us this quiz organized by Scuppernong Books. We thought it was too fun not to share.

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The Extra Ingredient

So you want to be a movie extra, eh? Better think twice

By Karen White

So you wanna be a movie extra?

I don't recommend it.

Unless, unlike me, you enjoy being excessively cold, or hot, wet, battered by wind (could be natural or man-made), sunburned, sitting around in uncomfortable clothing (or very little clothing, depending on the movie, but most likely clothing that is inappropriate for the weather you happen to be out in), and/or hungry. But maybe you like working twelve to sixteen hours straight, doing either absolutely nothing in a confined space with a lot of other people, or doing the same thing over and over again, all while being barked at by a sweaty, sleep-deprived Second AD (Assistant Director). Intense as this person is, he or she is the only person who appreciates you one iota, unless, of course, you don't follow directions, in which case you drop even further down the social strata — lower than merely "background" to "*You*, just stand behind that pillar. Don't talk, don't move."

Or perhaps you like being herded hither and yon, sheep-like, if the sheep were muted. Even your feet have to be quiet. I was on a set the other day and the extras, who were of the lucky variety that got to be indoors, had to wear slippers so as to not make noise when they walked, which looked pretty silly with their business suits.

Maybe you enjoy having to wait to get in line to eat lunch. Lunch is always six hours after the start of the crew's call time, whether that's noon, or 4 p.m. or midnight. Extras must wait until the Talent and the Crew have had their fill. If you've ever wished you could be whisked back to medieval times with its clear class distinctions — King, Earl, Duke, Princess, Knight, etc. — and you don't mind putting in your time as a lowly Serf, then being an extra in film and TV is for you, baby.

In case you haven't guessed, it's not for me. True, I may be sensorially sensitive and am definitely hypoglycemic. I also crave a little something called respect. But working as an extra pretty much stunk as far as I was concerned.

When *Good Will Hunting* was shooting in Boston oh so many years ago, my now-husband but then-new-boyfriend was working on it. I'm an actress, and while I'd worked professionally in the theater for years and had done a bunch of commercials, I'd never been on a big film set. I knew the guy who did the background casting and I figured, "Hey, this will be a way for me to get paid to hang out with my boyfriend!" Silly me. I did see my boyfriend, but we were only within shouting distance a couple of times. As the boom guy, my sweetie was right up there with the actual actors recording their dialogue. I, on the other hand, was in a crowd of other extras, all strategically located far enough away so that we'd be a blur on film. But we were close enough that our body movements could be seen and our voices heard. The scene was a little league baseball game; we were the cheering crowd. Our task was to believably and consistently appear to be watching the game and cheering — without making a sound! As per Background Torture 101 requirements, it was a cold spring day but we were dressed for high summer. For about ten hours.

I did get to meet pre-celebrity-status Ben Affleck that day. You may remember that he co-wrote the movie with that cute Matt Damon. Ben was in the scene at the ballpark and he graciously came up to chat with the "fans." He was pretty handsome but unfortunately that whole experience was ruined when he answered a question I asked with "Yes, Ma'am." You might just think that he was a well-mannered young man whose momma had raised him right. But friends, this was Boston. And yes, I was a sprightly 34 at the time, but I just looked it up on the always reliable Wikipedia and he is only nine years younger than me. Yes Ma'am, my rear end.

But, you may say, "Oh, I don't want to be an extra to hang out with my new boyfriend. I want to learn about the movie industry and meet big stars." Well, let me tell you, being an extra is not the way to do that. Misguided (or farsighted) Ben Affleck aside, it is extremely rare for the big stars to do anything beyond make a sweep by the background holding pen, with a royal wave to thank the troops. You're not getting an audience with the king, honey. And since the Crew and actual Talent view most folks who really want to be extras as just shy of crazy, they'll all give you a wide berth and keep you far, far away from most of the goings-on where you might actually learn something. You will, however, get to know that aforementioned Second AD and all of his or her quirks and neuroses quite well. For better or worse.

Here's my advice: Get to know a really nice makeup or wardrobe person, maybe even a boom guy. Talk them into letting you visit a set on a day where they're working inside, when the lunch is gonna be good, when the star you want to meet is working. Be polite and quiet and you'll probably get a little tour; get to meet lots of people and even get to sit on one of those fancy director's chairs and put on headphones to watch them make the magic. Have a nice lunch with your friend and the other crew members. Then, when you're tired, bored or cold, go home. Of course, if things don't change with the film incentives, you may have to follow your friend to Atlanta for this adventure. But that's a whole other can of worms.

Karen White is an audiobook narrator with more than 200 books to her credit. After 16 years in purgatory, er, Los Angeles, she's delighted to be back in the Southern Part of Heaven, where she records books in a teeny-tiny studio in her home. You can find her on Twitter@karenwhitereads or at karenwhiteaudiobooks.com.

Kiet Nguyen

At Saigon Bistro, dishes shine with the authenticity of home

By Jason Frye

"What you cook, I guess it always comes back to that home style. It's what you grew up with. That's what makes you feel good. That's what gives you the tastes you love," says chef Kiet Nguyen.

He tells me this standing in his kitchen as he makes dumplings. First, he carefully measures a length of chilled dough, then he flattens it with his hand, then he mashes it with his cleaver, making a little half-moon motion and spreading it thin. When it's about as round as a silver dollar pancake, he scoops it up, fills it with shrimp, and pinches it shut. He's got a stack of steamer baskets filled — four to a basket on a banana-leaf bed — and another to go, but he's a machine and his motions only slow when he gestures for emphasis, cleaver shining in the air, his empty hand waving.

Kiet owns Saigon Bistro, and there he makes dishes that evoke the Vietnam of his childhood.

"My mom, my grandmom, my aunt, they all own restaurants, but Vietnam is not like here. Here, your restaurant does a little of everything, back home, you specialize. You cook pho," he points his cleaver at imaginary cooks. "You cook stir-fry. You cook dumplings."

While he says this, three more dumplings go into a steamer.

"Cooking back home is woman's work, but as a little child, I watch my mom and grandmom. That's where I learn to cook."

It's always "back home" with Kiet. Even though he's been in the States since 1989, some large part of his heart belongs to Vietnam.

When he arrived, he began his cooking career, first at one of those teppanyaki joints Americans insist are called "hibachi" — you know, the ones where they twirl their knives and make an onion volcano — then making sushi in one of those "hibachi" restaurants. But it bored him.

"That's when my wife says to me, 'Kiet, you need to cook Vietnamese food,' and I listened to her," he says.

One conversation changed him. He thought about the dishes he loved as a child and as a young man back home. He thought about helping his grandmom make stock for her pho. He thought of making dumplings. He thought of the stir-frys and the early morning trips to the market that gave rise to not-so-good-natured teasing.

Kiet, his mom, grandmom and aunt would arrive at the market at 4 a.m. to get the freshest meats, vegetables and noodles, but, as he said, cooking is woman's work back home. Catcalls and cries of "Hey, little girl" would follow him through the market, but still, something in his heart kept him close to the hearth and he learned the secrets of cooking.

At Saigon Bistro, Kiet's Vietnamese dishes shine with that authenticity that comes more from feel and memory than classroom-kitchen learning. The com tay cam hai san — rice in a clay pot cooked with crab, mussels, shrimp, scallops and squid with a tangy, smoky tomato sauce — is a favorite, as is the canh chua — a hot pot soup that's zesty and citrusy. But the pho, the national dish of Vietnam that consists of a rich beef broth, noodles, herbs and, traditionally, beef or chicken, is spectacular. In the fall of 2014, he expanded his weekend menu to include his take on dim sum — "Chinese with a Vietnamese twist," he says — and has plans to open a bánh mì and bubble tea shop on Front Street, carrying on the family tradition of delicious street food.

"What is authentic? When someone asks if my food is authentic Vietnamese food, I say, 'Of course it is,' because it's the food I remember my grandmom making for her customers and for us at home. My grandmom, she was one hell of a cook and many things I make are straight from her."

Kiet offered up two recipes, one for pho, a dish he says is "perfect for the family to share," and one for fresh spring rolls, something he calls "great for parties or gatherings of friends."

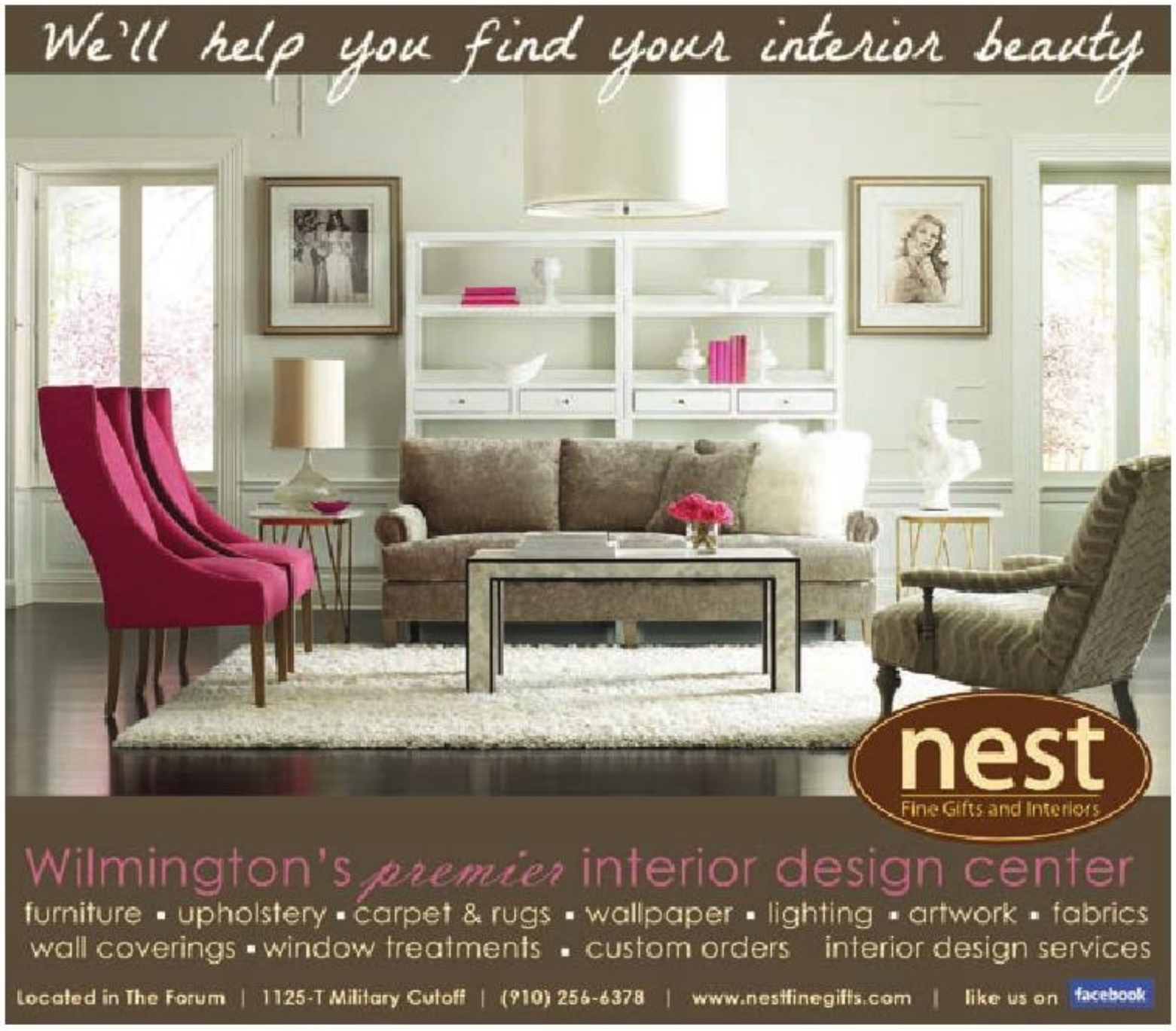
Pho

3–4 pounds beef soup bones (marrow and knuckle bones)
1.5–2 pounds chicken bones (from a rotisserie chicken or a bone-in cut)
1 pound beef trimmings, not too fatty
1 large daikon (winter radish), peeled and diced
2 jumbo yellow onions
4 inches ginger root
5–8 star anise
2 cinnamon sticks
10–20 black or Szechuan peppercorns
5 whole cloves
1 tablespoon toasted fennel seeds
or fresh, high-quality Chinese five-spice powder to taste

Pho rice noodles (fresh if possible, highest quality dried if not)
Thai basil
Cilantro
Mung bean sprouts
Hoisin sauce
Sriracha sauce
Lime or lemon

Put beef bones, chicken bones and beef trimmings in a large stockpot and top with water. Bring to a boil and reduce to a low simmer. You'll be cooking this all day to draw the most flavor into your stock, so watch the

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES STEFIUK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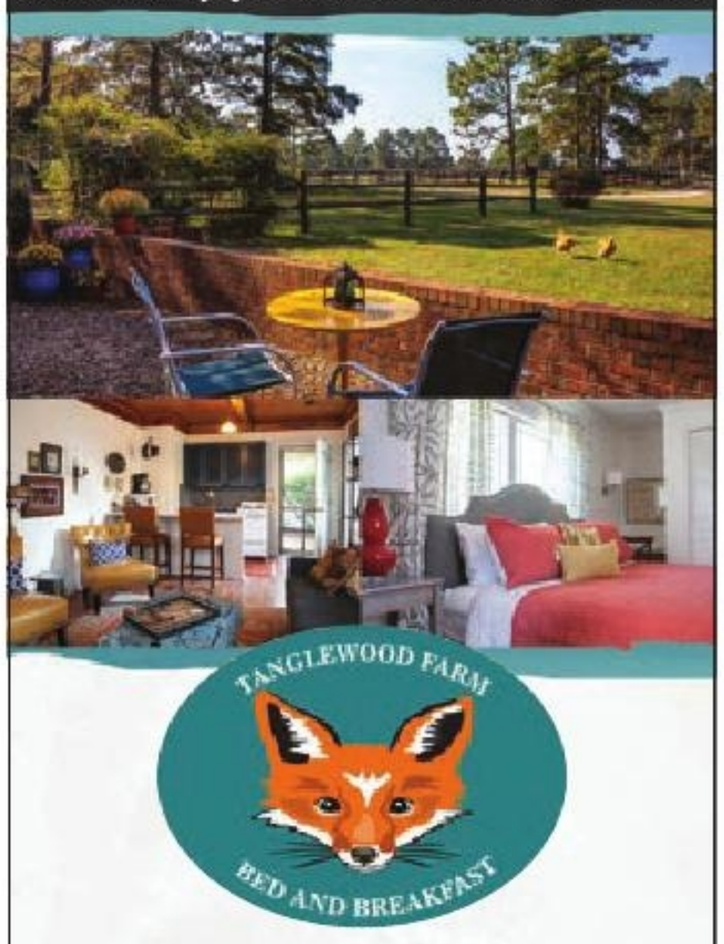

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water level and add water as needed.

After simmering for a half-day or so, add daikon, onions, and ginger.

Let those cook for a while then add star anise, cinnamon sticks, whole black or Szechuan peppercorns, cloves, and toasted fennel seeds. Alternately you can use a good, fresh Chinese five-spice mix to flavor your broth.

Cook broth, tasting periodically. When you've developed the richness of the broth to your taste, strain the bones, trimmings, vegetables, and spices from the broth. Taste again, adding salt, sugar, and a dash of MSG to taste.

Soak your pho rice noodles (ask for the most fresh Pho Rice Noodle at Saigon Market) in cold water, then prepare according to directions.

Place a serving of noodles in a large bowl, then top with broth.

Serve with Thai basil, cilantro, and mung bean sprouts. Add hoisin sauce and sriracha to taste. Squeeze fresh lime or lemon over the top.

*If you opt to include meat in your pho, traditionally it is served with beef or chicken. Kiet recommends ribeye for beef. Thinly slice your beef or chicken (or have the butcher do it for you) and sear to medium before adding it to the broth. You may also serve with shrimp, which should be boiled separately and served at the last minute.

Fresh Spring Roll

21-25 Shrimp (1 per roll)
1/2 pound pork tenderloin or belly
or 1/2 block tofu
Rice vermicelli
Rice paper/spring roll rice paper
Cilantro
Mung bean sprouts
Thai basil

Cook shrimp then dunk in ice bath to stop cooking. Cut shrimp in half lengthwise and reserve.

Cook pork tenderloin, cool, and cut into matchsticks.

Prepare your rice vermicelli according to directions and set aside.

Moisten rice paper using lukewarm water, then, in the center of the paper put a sprig of cilantro, rice vermicelli, pork matchsticks, bean sprouts, shrimp and Thai basil. Carefully roll rice paper and seal. Set aside until time to serve.

Nguyen serves his with a sauce that includes Hoisen sauce, cornstarch, sugar and peanut butter.

Jason Frye is a travel writer and author of Moon North Carolina *and* Moon NC Coast. *He's a barbecue judge, he rarely naps, and he's always on the road. Keep up with his travels at tarheeltourist.com.*

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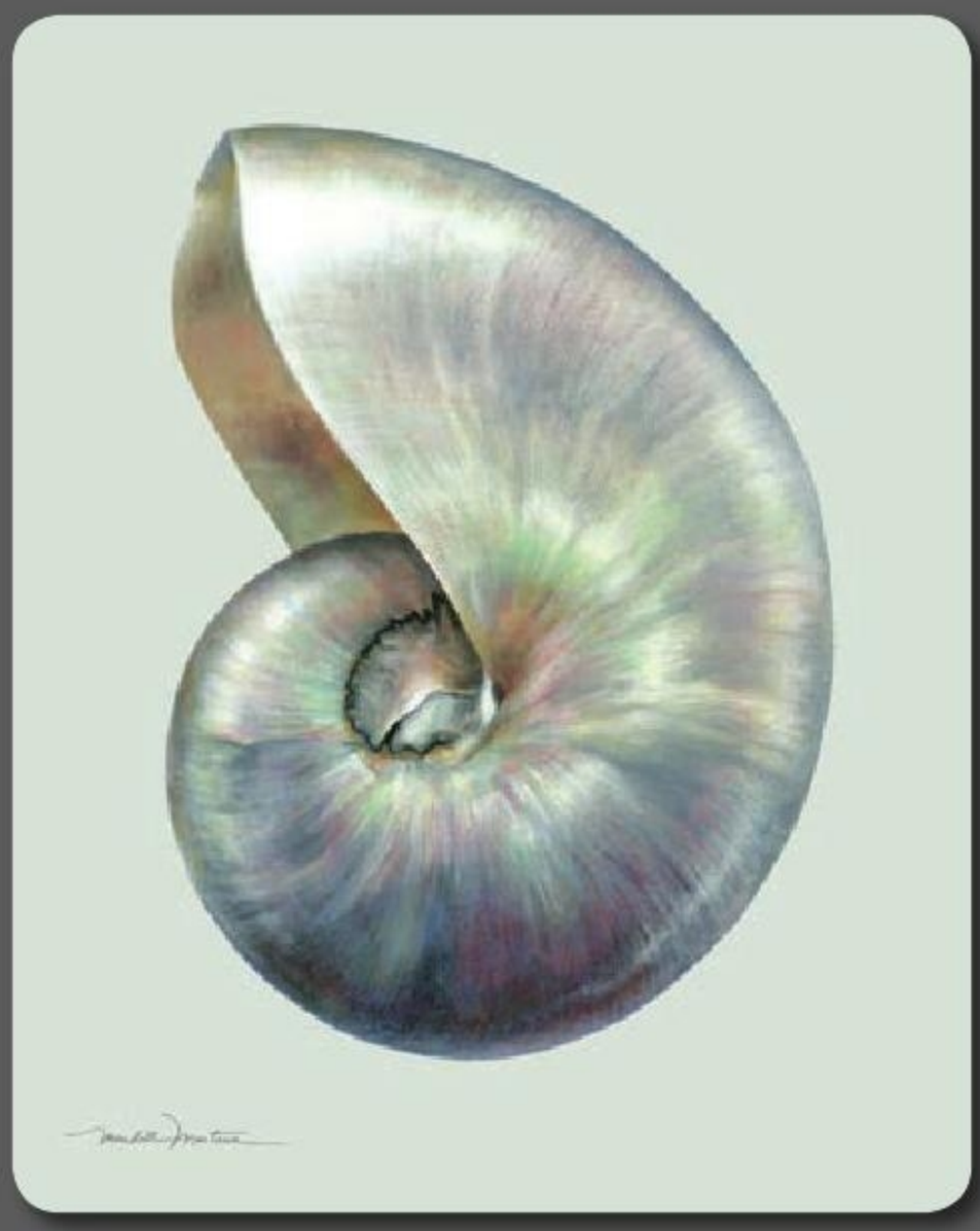
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Lunch à la Mode

Think stylishly simple over something fishy

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES STEFIUK

By Dana Sachs

Lately, I've noticed some odd combinations in fashion. A woman might pair an Oxford-style button-down blouse, for example, with a metallic elephant-print wraparound skirt (J. Crew). A guy might put a sport coat over a V-neck sweater (Burberry). Let's call the style "See What I Can Pull Off." They're odd combinations, but they're also more interesting than the old suit-and-tie or skirt-and-sweater.

Only a very thin line, however, divides "See What I Can Pull Off" from "What Was She (or He) Thinking?" One false move could mean that those stares you attract at the cocktail party reflect shock, not admiration. Because I lack confidence in my own ability to pull off these styles, when I met T. J. Dunn for lunch at Something Fishy Seafood, I brought along an extra outfit so that I could get his advice.

T. J. is a style consultant or, as he put it, "kind of like a personal trainer when it comes to your look." His services range from big event preparation, such as helping a bride pick out her wedding dress, to all-encompassing clothing appraisals, such as a "wardrobe audit," which helps clients figure out their style and then organize their wardrobe appropriately. More generally, T. J. serves as booster for Wilmington's burgeoning fashion industry, chairing Downtown Wilmington Inc.'s Downtown Shop Committee and organizing Wilmington Fashion Week.

As a consultant, though, T. J. focuses on style, not fashion. "Style is relevant to your budget, your age, and your location," he told me over lunch. "What people wear in New York might not be relevant to what people wear here."

In other words, he's practical. For example, one client told him, "I just want to get dressed in a hurry." The man hoped to leave the house within fifteen minutes of waking up every morning and still look good. Together, they reorganized the client's closet to create a "work clothes" area where every single shirt matched every single pair of pants. "Choosing an outfit" just meant grabbing one of each.

When T. J. accompanies clients on shopping trips, budget helps determine their destination. In Wilmington, he often ends up in one of three geographic hubs – downtown, Mayfaire/Lumina Station, or Independence Mall. Though he loves locally owned shops like Lula Balou, Aqua Fedora, Bloke, and Edge of Urge, he also frequents discount stores like Marshalls, Ross, and T.J. Maxx.

T. J.'s own look proves that style doesn't have to be expensive. When we met, he had on a reasonably priced purple checked shirt from Lumina Clothing Company, Levi's 511 jeans, and dime-sized Tiger's Eye ear studs. The outfit, combined with his long hair pulled back into braids, gave him a look that was perfect for SoHo and a knockout in Wilmington. Those jeans came from J. C. Penney, by the way.

Eating at Something Fishy, a homey spot along a not-so-pretty stretch of South College Road, feels a little like shopping at the discount stores: Not everything is great, but you will find treasures. The restaurant specializes in Calabash-style seafood, a breaded and deep-fried regional dish that, done badly, will arrive at your table as a greasy mountain of tasteless mush. Fortunately, Something Fishy does Calabash well. T. J. and I ordered the fried sampler, a vast array of crispy golden shrimp, clams, oysters, scallops, trout,

and deviled crab that had enough seasoning to give it personality but not so much that it overwhelmed the natural sweetness of the fish.

The menu at Something Fishy concentrates on combinations of fried fish accompanied by cole slaw, a choice of vegetable, and those fragrant pop-in-the-mouth hush puppies that seem to get eaten before you and your companion have even said "hello." Daily specials add variety. T. J. and I tried a piece of grilled tuna, which was fresh and tasty but lacked the sparkle of the fried specialties. Smeared with wasabi and dipped in soy sauce, it reminded me of sashimi, but felt slightly wrong in that environment, like a Chanel suit on Dress-Down Friday.

Nothing felt wrong about Something Fishy's desserts, which are baked by a member of the owner's family. We shared slices of cake, a buttery chocolate layer and a rich, dense coconut laden with sugary flakes. For a while, we ate in awed silence. Then T. J. said, "I just love food altogether." Eventually, I showed him my extra outfit: a lightweight purple corduroy skirt, a sky blue T-shirt, and, as a sort-of jacket, a batik-patterned cotton blouse in shades of rust, cream and (yes) sky blue. Would it work as "See What I Can Pull Off"?

He was kind. He examined the clothes, holding patterns together, comparing colors. "I can see where you're pulling the blue," he said, holding the T-shirt next to the blouse.

"I have examples," I said. On my phone, I showed him pictures from websites in which odd combinations looked shockingly terrific, like a tweed skirt with furry winter hiking boots (not Uggs). "Why do these outfits work so well?" I asked.

"Well," T. J. said, "it comes from having an eye for it. Keeping it simple, like having everything in the same tone or having consistency in the fabrics, like putting thicker winter fabrics together, which looks very cozy. Or, putting things together from nature. You could pair red and blue flowers with something sunny and yellow." An orange shirt, he said, would actually look good with green camouflage prints, because orange and camouflage all relate to hunting.

I was starting to realize that my "outfit" lacked any unifying logic.

T. J. refused to be dismissive, however. His number one rule is "own your own look," so he encouraged me. "If you love it, you own it."

I looked down at my pile of clothes. "I don't know if I love it," I told him.

Few people's natural sense of style enables them to really pull off a "See What I Can Pull Off." The rest of us, I realized, need someone like T. J. Dunn.

If you'd like to know more about T. J. Dunn, visit his very cool website TJDunn.com, email him at TJDunnsc@gmail.com, or call (910) 742-0721. For updates on Wilmington Fashion Week 2015, April 1–4, visit www.facebook.com/wilmingtonfashionweekend. Something Fishy Seafood is at 3436 South College Road and can be reached by phone at (910) 395-0909.

Dana Sachs' latest novel, The Secret of the Nightingale Palace, *is available at bookstores throughout Wilmington.*

Love on The Binge

Was a tie that binds – until reality set in

By Jane Borden

My father called the television a distraction when my sisters and I were growing up. He thought it robbed us of precious time otherwise spent outdoors or doing homework. He'd stride into the kitchen for dinner, gesture dismissively at the set and ask, "Can't we turn that racket off?" To the outside viewer, this may sound aloof. But I know the truth. My father is not above television; he's a victim to it.

One evening in high school, while perched on a stool by the tube, I heard a quiet rustle – the movement of papers or brushing of corduroy – and spun around to see my father in the doorway staring blankly at the screen. He'd been reading the paper in the den and, on his way upstairs, had peeked in the kitchen to check on me. But then, his eyes met the shiny, colorful screen and were instantly transformed into spinning kaleidoscopes.

"Dad?"

"Wha?" he asked, confused, before snapping back to reality. "Oh." Then, he grumbled, "Dagnabbit!" before walking upstairs, leaving me with no idea how long he'd been standing there, and no definition for the word "dagnabbit." I should have known that this predisposition would be hereditary. I should have known that, if put to the test, I would also be weak to the distracting power of television.

Ross loved the TV. He could come home from work, turn it on and sit for the night. I mean, I assume he still does: He's not dead; we just aren't dating anymore.

As someone who felt guilty about how much she watched as a kid, I'd become determined as an adult to avoid it. So, in the beginning of our relationship, I often suggested we listen to music or play cards. He was happy to accommodate me. Still, at one point or another in the evening, the television was always turned back on. I'd be in his kitchen making drinks or doing dishes and hear the Herculean thud of it coming to life, hear the reverberation of the massive amount of energy required to animate the flat-screen HD beast and its many accessory heads. The six-foot space against his living room wall had enough wires to run a Broadway show. How ironic it could have been to watch *An Inconvenient Truth* on it.

"But I like TV," he'd say. And I honestly didn't judge him for it. He's an accomplished, award-winning writer who'd reached the point in his career where he could do what he pleased with his free time. Besides, "'Each to his own', said the lady who kissed the cow." That's one of my father's favorite sayings. But if you aren't from Eastern North Carolina, I'll translate with one of my mother's: "You can't change people."

Instead, I dipped my toe into the shallow end of acceptable programming: *Planet Earth*, Errol Morris documentaries, *60 Minutes*. The water was fine. So I moved on to 30-minute comedies, the gateway shows: *30*

ILLUSTRATION BY MERIDITH MARTENS

Rock, *South Park* and *The Colbert Report*. And then I was hooked: *Deadwood*, *Ugly Betty*, *Project Runway*. I treated the DVR menu like a to-do list: "I can meet for drinks, Susanna, but I can't stay for dinner: We've got two episodes of *Wife Swap* to get through before Monday."

One Saturday afternoon I came over and found Ross watching *X-Men: The Last Stand*. Still somewhat determined to fight the machine, I took my book into the bedroom. But after reading the same paragraph three times, I acquiesced and joined him on the couch. "OK, so . . . each of the mutants has a different power?" I asked with tepid curiosity. Before long I was glossy-eyed and engrossed: "Wait, you said Magneto can attract metal, right? Not concrete. So no way could he make the entire Golden Gate bridge hover in the air like that!"

"This is where you choose to stop suspending your disbelief?" he joked.

These were the TV salad days. We shared a love of entertainment. Some couples will always have Paris; Ross and I will always have Bravo's *Top Chef*. Our relationship spanned the first two seasons and half of the third. When Harold, the Season 1 winner, opened a restaurant in the West Village, we went during its first week of business. But my favorite reality show, my biggest obsession was *The Girls Next Door*, a behind-the-scenes documentary-style look at the lives of Hugh Hefner's top three girlfriends, Holly, Bridget and Kendra (in that order). It's "Big Love" with silicone breasts. It's also crack for an otherwise discerning brain.

I ordered the first season on DVD. This time, Ross was humoring me.

"Who's your favorite?" I asked.

"Holly," he replied earnestly. "She seems like the smartest."

"Smart?! She thinks Hef will actually marry her one day. That's pretty stupid if you ask me."

Ross and I had delivered into a picture-book 1950s couple: The television was always in the background. But instead of cooking dinner, we had it delivered. Two beings, sitting an inch from one another and completely unaware of the other's presence, interrupted only by the buzzer announcing our Thai food delivery — which, since we could fast-forward commercials, was our only break in the action.

One night while sitting on the floor, chopsticks in hand, Ross asked, "Are there more napkins in the bag?" Or, at least, I think that's what he asked. I didn't hear him.

"Jane!" He repeated in frustration.

"Wha?" I asked in confusion before landing back on earth. "Oh."

Dagnabbit. I apologized and asked him to repeat the question — after pushing pause on the DVR remote.

It took months for me to realize that a few questions weren't the only things I'd failed to notice. While we sat, blowing through the first season of *Strangers with Candy*, our relationship was falling apart. Television wasn't to blame, mind you — we fell out of love for the sundry reasons people typically do — TV just facilitated our inability to recognize it. Shiny colors, pleasant sounds, pretty people. Watching wasn't just a routine; it was the enormous tapestry obscuring the very ugly elephant in his living room.

My bond with television has always been based on escape. I watch to take my mind off a bad day at work, a long plane flight, a hangover. But, then, the acknowledgment that I was using television as a drug only led me to self medicate more.

One afternoon I got out of work early and arrived at his apartment before he did. I was listening to David Bowie and cooking when I heard his key in the lock and immediately tensed up. Talk to him, I thought. Express your doubts and concerns. Then again, we have a new *Flight of the Conchords* saved. That'd be easy — so easy, in fact, that you won't even have to suggest it. He will. THUD. You won't have to say anything at all. THUD. "Seriously, Holly is so deluded. She's so blind." THUD. We, on the other hand, are fine, I thought. This was where I chose to stop suspending my disbelief.

We literally broke up to the television. It was so post-modern, the perfect fourth act. The Library of Congress Award special for Paul Simon was airing on PBS. Alison Krauss covered "Graceland."

"Things don't feel the same," I said.

"I know," he said.

And she said, "They say losing love is like a window in your heart. Everybody sees you're blown apart. Everyone sees the wind blow."

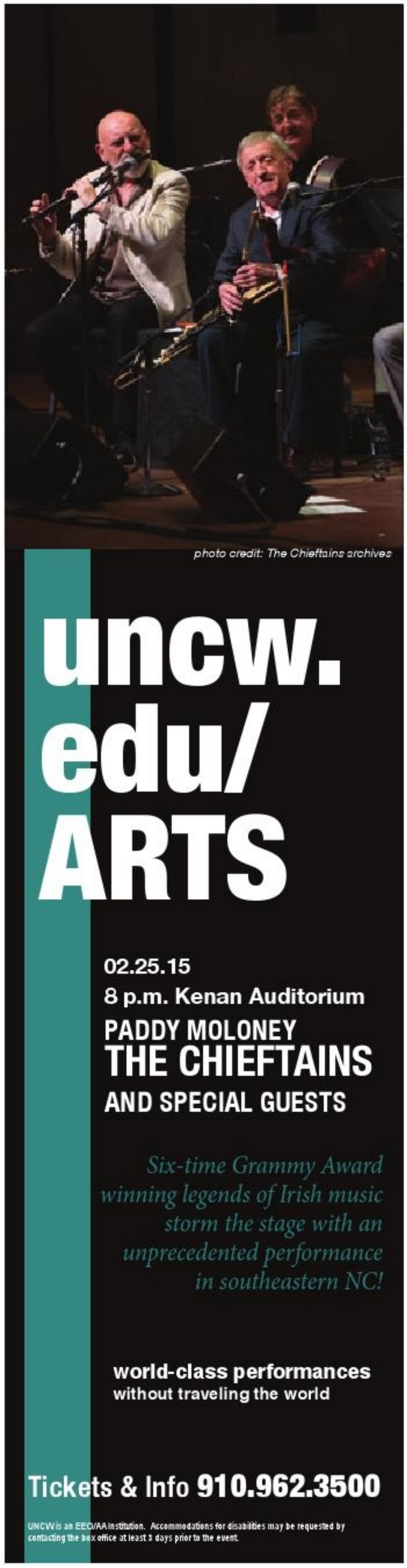
We hung out the next night too. Even though we knew it was over, we needed a coda. After the credits run, there's usually one more scene. But in our case, there was nothing left to say.

"We have a new episode of *Top Chef*," he offered.

"Want to order Thai?"

And so we sat, inches from each other, chopsticks in hand, taking turns fast-forwarding commercials, discussing who we thought would get kicked off, sharing ideas for what either of us would have paired with the halibut instead. When you watch, when you focus on the action beyond you, you float above the circumstance, above the atmosphere. You can't see the wind blow.

Jane Borden is a Greensboro native living in Los Angeles, and the author of the much acclaimed memoir I Totally Meant to Do That. *Follow her at twitter.com/JaneBorden. JaneBorden.com, CorporateJuggernaut.com,* I Totally Meant to Do That *is in bookstores now.*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Discovering Alvin Baker

Forty years ago, standing on the deck of the USS North Carolina, *the author learned of his own personal connection to the Civil War in the Cape Fear region*

By Stephen E. Smith

"This close," my father says, holding the tips of his index finger and thumb 1/16th of an inch apart. "Any closer and we wouldn't be here."

We're standing on the deck of the USS *North Carolina* staring down the aft battery of 16-inch rifles aimed across the Cape Fear River at spring-blasted Wilmington. It's a Saturday in April 1975. Azaleas and dogwoods are in bloom, and the scattered trees on the opposite bank are greening into gauzy foliage.

Thirty-two years earlier, while stationed at Pearl Harbor, my father had gone aboard the *North Carolina* to visit friends, and I'm wondering if he's recalling a catastrophe he'd narrowly avoided.

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

"That's what your great-great-grandfather used to say to me when I was a boy. He always talked about being wounded during the Civil War, and it happened around here, somewhere down this river." He points south.

"Who was this?"

"Alvin Baker. He was your grandfather's grandfather and served in Company D of the 103rd Ohio Volunteer Infantry. He fought here in February of 1865 near a place called Fort Anderson, and he was wounded at Town Creek. He used to hold his hand in front of my face and say what I just said to you. A ball came that close to killing him."

"And you remember a lot about him?"

"I was 9 when he died. I remember every story he told me."

That was the first I'd heard of my great-great-grandfather Alvin Baker. I knew of several maternal ancestors who'd fought for the Confederacy, but this sudden introduction of a Union soldier into our Southern family tree came as a complete surprise. Moreover, it seemed impossible that my father, who was 55 on that spring day, was old enough to have known someone who fought in the Civil War, even if the math suggested otherwise.

This much is certain: My father had gotten my attention, and for the next twenty years, when I visited with him, the subject of Alvin Baker — Grandpa Baker, he called him — usually came up. My father repeated stories he'd been told by the old soldier himself or by my paternal grandfather, who had delayed the telling of the bawdier tales until my father was of an appropriate age.

Many of the stories involved alcohol and youthful exuberance. One such yarn has Alvin and a fellow soldier waylaying an unfortunate Wilmingtonian in order to steal a bottle of whiskey. Another tale describes the interaction between freed slaves and drunken Union soldiers. Neither anecdote is pleasant.

But the stories intrigued me; they were peppered with obscure place names — Snow's Pond, Emery's Iron Works, Blue Springs, Strawberry Plains, Mossy Brick, Noyes Creek, Etowah River, Rough and Ready, and Big Shanty. At the time, I was living a few miles outside Wilmington, and I was familiar with many of the locations mentioned in Alvin's adventures — Fort Fisher, Smithville, Fort Anderson, Town Creek, Kinston and Goldsboro.

And there were artifacts — three faded letters Alvin wrote to his widowed mother, a Grand Army of the Republic medal, the old soldier's honorable discharge, and two photographs, an ambrotype of Alvin and his wife, Florence, and a cabinet card of the old veteran decked out in his Sunday best, a cane in his right hand, his ragged gray beard obscuring the lapels on his vest.

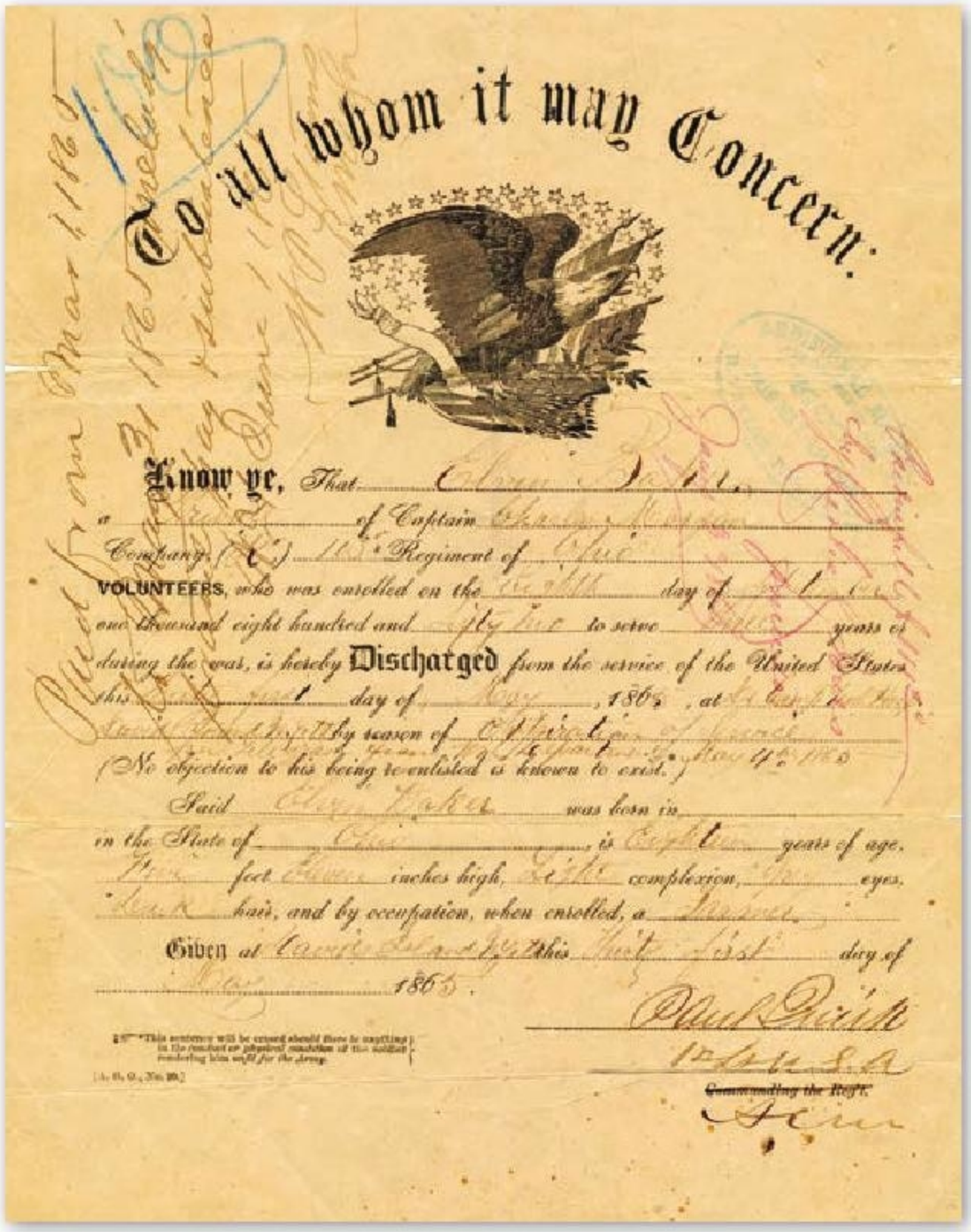
The storytelling continued until my father suffered a stroke in the mid-90s. When he'd recovered sufficiently, I asked him, "Is there anything else you remember about Grandpa Baker?"

"There is," he said. "He gave me his Civil War rifle, and I left it out in the rain until it rusted away." He never mentioned his great-grandfather again.

I inherited a thick sheath of papers on Alvin Baker's Civil War exploits and set about puzzling together the early life of my Union ancestor. My father's notes

indicate that Alvin was typical of young men at the outset of the war; he was headstrong and caught up in the prevailing patriotic fervor. A carbon copy of a pension affidavit submitted in 1894 claims he'd lied about his age in order to join the army (was there ever a Civil War soldier who didn't lie about his age when enlisting?), and there's a handwritten personal narrative that traces the 103rd's march into Georgia with Sherman, the fall of Atlanta, and the battles of Franklin and Nashville, where, according to Alvin, "We gave the Rebs a good cleaning." A brief entry touches on the 23rd Army Corps' transit by train to Alexandria, Virginia, where they boarded ships for a rough passage to Fort Fisher.

The papers contained no information about Alvin's post-war years, and I figured he'd lived a long and happy life at Freedom Station, Ohio, a village outside of Ravenna, where he died at the age of 82, having served his country and lived out his time.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Company (C) 103d Regiment of [illegible]

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one thousand eight hundred and [illegible] to serve [illegible] years or during the war, is hereby **Discharged** from the service of the United States this [illegible] day of May, 1865, at [illegible]

by reason of [illegible]

(No objection to his being so enlisted is known to exist.)

Said [illegible] was born in [illegible]

in the State of [illegible] is [illegible] years of age, [illegible] feet [illegible] inches high, [illegible] complexion, [illegible] eyes, [illegible] hair, and by occupation, when enrolled, a [illegible]

Given at [illegible] this [illegible] day of [illegible] 1865.

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

To place the 103rd's war record in perspective, I read Shelby Foote's three volume history *The Civil War: A Narrative*. Although Foote goes into great detail about the fall of Fort Fisher, he writes nothing about the military maneuvers on the west bank of the Cape Fear. Since the battlefields around Wilmington weren't far from my back door, I visited Fort Anderson (by far my favorite state park) and occasionally wandered the River Road, hoping to find the Town Creek battleground — what the boys at the Gator Hole on Route 133 referred to as the "Battle of the Ball Field" — but I had little to go on.

Then I got my hands on Chris Fonvielle's *The Wilmington Campaign: Last Rays of Departing Hope*, the definitive history of the fall of Wilmington (anyone who lives in Brunswick or New Hanover counties should keep a copy of Fonvielle's book on his or her nightstand; it's beautifully written and thoroughly researched), and the military maneuvers around Wilmington became perfectly clear.

The Ohio 103rd, under the command of Maj. Gen. Jacob Cox, landed at Fort Fisher on February 8, 1865, and on the 11th they participated in an action near Sugar Loaf Battery. On the 17th, they were ferried to Smithville (Southport) to begin their march on Fort Anderson. It quickly became apparent that a frontal assault on the fort would be costly, so Cox led his command southwest around Orton Pond, forcing the Confederates to evacuate the fort on the night of the 18th. The Rebels fell back to a new defensive line north of Town Creek, tearing up the bridge behind them.

The creek was unfordable, so on February 20, Cox used a small flat-bottom boat to ferry three brigades across Town Creek east of the Rebel entrenchments. Outflanked, the Confederates began to withdraw toward Wilmington, leaving two regiments to cover their retreat. Casement's Brigade, which included the 103rd, formed double lines with Sterl's Brigade and attacked the Confederates, routing the two regiments and taking more than 350 prisoners.

(To retrace Cox's advance on the west bank of the Cape Fear, drive north from Southport on Route 133, stopping at Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson State Historic Site. When you're a mile or two north of the Town Creek bridge, you'll pass the battlefield. The land is privately owned, and unless you're fond of snakes, mosquitoes, chiggers and ticks, your best bet is a Google Earth tour. For a detailed description of the battle, see *Making the Obstinate Stand: The Battle of Town Creek and the Fall of Wilmington*, by Chris Fonvielle, Civil War Regiments, Volume Six, No. 1.)

After reading *The Wilmington Campaign*, I contacted Broadfoot Civil War Soldier Search Service — another Wilmington connection — and they supplied me with all of Alvin Baker's official documents: muster rolls, a detailed history of the 103rd O.V.I., and a pile of correspondence regarding his post-war health problems.

Probably my father never knew of the desperate straits in which Alvin Baker found himself in the years following the war. He married in 1866 and worked as a yard foreman for the Atlantic and Great Western Railroad until the company was sold to the New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio Railroad in 1880. Fifteen years after his discharge, he lost his job and began petitioning the Department of the Interior for a disability pension. He would continue to do so, with a good deal of success, for the next forty-four years.

His health problems began in late July 1864 when he suffered "sunstroke" during the Siege of Atlanta. He was confined for six weeks to a military hospital in Marietta, Georgia, an exceptionally long hospitalization for a boy who was suffering from heat exhaustion. As his comrade H. M. Frissell attested in an 1889 affidavit, "Alvin Baker was one of the many that tried to do his duty in such a way that no one could say that he was not a true soldier. . . but he didn't have the constitution to endure the fatigue and hardships of army life. Often in the heat on long marches he became very pale and exhausted and his legs and knees would appear so weak that he would make a bad appearance."

Nevertheless, Alvin was with Company D in November and December 1864 when they fought at Franklin and Nashville, and he's listed as present for the Company's landing at Fort Fisher and maneuvers around Fort Anderson and Town Creek. Whatever the nature of the wound suffered on the 20th of February, it wasn't severe enough to necessitate his leaving the ranks, and he was present for the occupation of Wilmington and the advance on Goldsboro, where, at the end of March, he contracted typhoid fever and was hospitalized in a private home. In mid-April, he was transported to New Bern, where he was taken aboard the hospital steamer *Northern Light* bound for David's Island, New York. He was discharged on June 1, 1865 and returned to Ohio by rail to resume civilian pursuits.

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For the remainder of his life, Alvin backdated his health problems to the sunstroke he suffered near Atlanta, and numerous personal affidavits and three physical examinations describe a man who suffered chronic illness – "malarial poisoning," liver disease, recurrent chills and fever, "irritation of the spine," and muscular tremors, to name just a few of his afflictions. Alvin's neighbor Clint Dutter submitted a General Affidavit to the Department of the Interior in February 1894 noting that "Alvin Baker is confined almost all of his time to his bed and room, once in a while he walks out a little. His skin is of a sallow color, lean in flesh, debilitated. When he is in hard pain he is out of his mind."

The lesson is one that each generation must learn anew: Combat veterans carry the scars of war for the remainder of their lives. Their suffering persists long after hostilities have ceased and the world around them has moved on.

What do I have of Alvin Baker's life? His official discharge, a brass switch key marked A&GWRR from his time as a railroad foreman, a Seth-Thomas "Troy City Series" shelf clock that keeps perfect time, a sepia photograph of Alvin in his later years – and most importantly, membership in the 103rd O.V.I. Association.

After the war, the regiment of proud Ohio boys who charged across the Town Creek Battlefield on February 20, 1865, formed an organization which is the only one of its kind, North or South. The veterans pooled their money and purchased acreage on Lake Erie in the town of Sheffield Lake, Ohio, where they built barracks, a dance hall, a dining hall and cottages. They and/or their descendants have gathered there every August since the end of the Civil War to celebrate the service of Cuyahoga, Lorain and Medina County soldiers who served in the 103rd Ohio Volunteer Infantry. I showed up at the 2013 reunion, probably the only Southerner in attendance, and I was warmly received. Each evening the veterans' great-great-great-grandchildren assemble on a bluff overlooking the broad expanse of Lake Erie and lower the flag to the strains of taps, followed by the singing of "Tenting on the Old Camp Ground."

On that day almost forty years ago, as my father and I stood on the deck of the USS *North Carolina* staring across the Cape Fear River at the Wilmington skyline, there was a convergence of generations and history. It's obvious now that my father thought it important for me to know about Alvin Baker – about his virtues and his faults and the vagaries of war that made new life possible on a perfect spring day.

Stephen E. Smith's most recent book of poems is A Short Report on the Fire at Woolworths. *He can be reached at travisses@hotmail.com*

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It Ain't About the Money

The subject is love

By Bill Thompson

As I have gotten older, my attitude toward holidays has changed a little. When I was very young, I really looked forward to those particular celebrations that included getting gifts. Christmas was the biggie in that regard, followed by Easter, which meant new clothes. Of course, as I got older the true meaning of those religious celebrations became more important to me.

Then there is Valentine's Day. It is named after a saint and is a religious holiday in some denominations, but most folks don't see it as a religious celebration at all. Most of us see February 14 as a day to buy flowers or chocolates or some other gift to show how much we love that special person in our lives.

When I was in grade school, we exchanged cards with our classmates . . . all of 'em. The special ones got little peppermint hearts.

So in keeping with my revised attitude toward holidays, I re-thought my definition of a Valentine's Day gift and how it relates to love. I came up with a few conclusions based on my own often-woeful experience as well as what some other people have experienced in the love department: What says more about love than a gift on Valentine's Day?

Love is sitting up all night in a hospital waiting room by yourself while your wife is in labor. I know that in this modern age, the option of being in the delivery room could change the birthing experience, but there are other occasions that could also apply to those waiting room experiences as well.

Love is watching her sleep. She doesn't have her makeup on or her hair brushed, and those wrinkles are a little more obvious. But somehow she still looks like the girl you married so many years ago.

Love is the feeling you get watching your son get his first haircut or your daughter's first dance recital.

Love is bringing her flowers you picked yourself when it's not a special occasion. (A bouquet of wildflowers counts extra.) Special occasions like Valentine's Day take all the spontaneity out of gift giving. Her reaction to the unexpected is a cherished picture. It also makes her wonder what you're up to.

Love is when you enjoy her beating you at Monopoly or *Jeopardy!* When that happens, just hint that you let her win even if she beat you fair and square. Then run like crazy.

Love is when she fixes your favorite meal even when she is as tired as you are.

Love is the smell of baby powder. First of all, baby powder just smells good, but sometimes the greatest value is that it replaces the smell of dirty diapers. Real love is when you change the diapers.

Love is when she just walks by your chair and gently touches the top of your head. That little action indicates a familiarity that only the two of you share. And, as the song says, "This could be the start of something big."

Love is wearing that pink shirt she bought you. You haven't worn a pink shirt since the days when Elvis was your hero, but now you are her hero.

Love is watching a Lifetime channel movie together. It's real love if you can watch two in a row.

Love is holding hands in the car while driving to the grocery store.

Love is making up your own poem for a Valentine card instead of buying one already written.

Love doesn't mean never having to say you're sorry. Love is saying you're sorry and meaning it.

Love is forgetting why you had an argument. (As you get older, that gets easier.)

Love can be confusing. It can make you so sad you want to cry and so happy you want to fly at the same time.

Love is one of those things you don't have to catch or mount on the wall in order to remember how great it is.

Love is like money; no matter how much you have, you always want more.

Love is letting her drive without telling her how as you sit beside her gripping the door handle.

In looking back at these observations, I noticed that money is not a major factor in any of them. So my conclusions are: (1) Love ain't about the money, and (2) Valentine's Day is once a year. Love doesn't have a calendar or an age limit.

Bill Thompson is a speaker and author who lives just down the road, in nearby Hallsboro.

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Northern Gannet

Winter's skilled diver

By Susan Campbell

This time of year, a number of species forage here, in and around the nutrient-rich Gulf Stream. Many are large birds that spend most of their lives at sea — pelagic species that have anatomical and behavioral adaptations which make such a challenging way of life possible. The most abundant of these birds in our waters is the Northern gannet. But you don't necessarily have to venture offshore to encounter one.

Northern gannets can frequently be seen from the beach. Some individuals will patrol inshore and may be close enough to identify without binoculars. Their coloration and profile make them quite distinctive. Watch for birds a bit larger than our largest gulls (great black-backeds) that are white with black wing tips. Immature birds may be gray in color or blotched gray and white. Like our larger gull species, Northern gannets take three to four years to mature, so their plumage may include a mix of immature and adult feathers.

The Northern gannet is without a doubt one of the most skilled diving birds in the area. They are visual predators that ascend high above the waves to pinpoint their prey. In winter months, gannets spend most of their time on the move searching for schools of fish such as menhaden. Whales, dolphins or aggregations of gulls may help clue them in to food sources, but once they find food, they are quick to take advantage of the opportunity. With powerful wings, they fly some twenty feet or more above the water and then tuck and dive, piercing the surface like an arrow. Although most dives are relatively shallow, individuals can descend to significant depths. When necessary, gannets can utilize both their wings and feet to propel them over seventy feet below the surface.

One of the most dramatic sights along our beaches is a flock of gannets plunge-diving as if in concert. When bait fish are plentiful, large numbers of Northern gannets will appear, seemingly from out of nowhere. They will converge and then rapidly descend, one after the other, from over one hundred feet above the water's surface. The spectacle may last minutes — or hours — until the school has been depleted.

Not surprisingly, these birds have a heavy, muscular neck and a large, strong and pointed bill. They can take squid as well as large fish. Northern gannets ride high on the surface when sitting on the water. Their strong legs and webbed feet allow for good mobility while swimming.

It is also interesting that the North American breeding population comes from merely six locations along the Atlantic coast of Canada. Young are produced from nests on the high cliffs of offshore islands. However, a percentage of the gannets found here in the winter also migrate from the coasts of Great Britain and Northern Europe.

So before this winter is over, head to the beach and scan the horizon. You may spot a few of these majestic birds soaring above the waves, on the lookout for their next meal.

Susan would love to receive your wildlife sightings and photos. She can be contacted by email at susan@ncaves.com.

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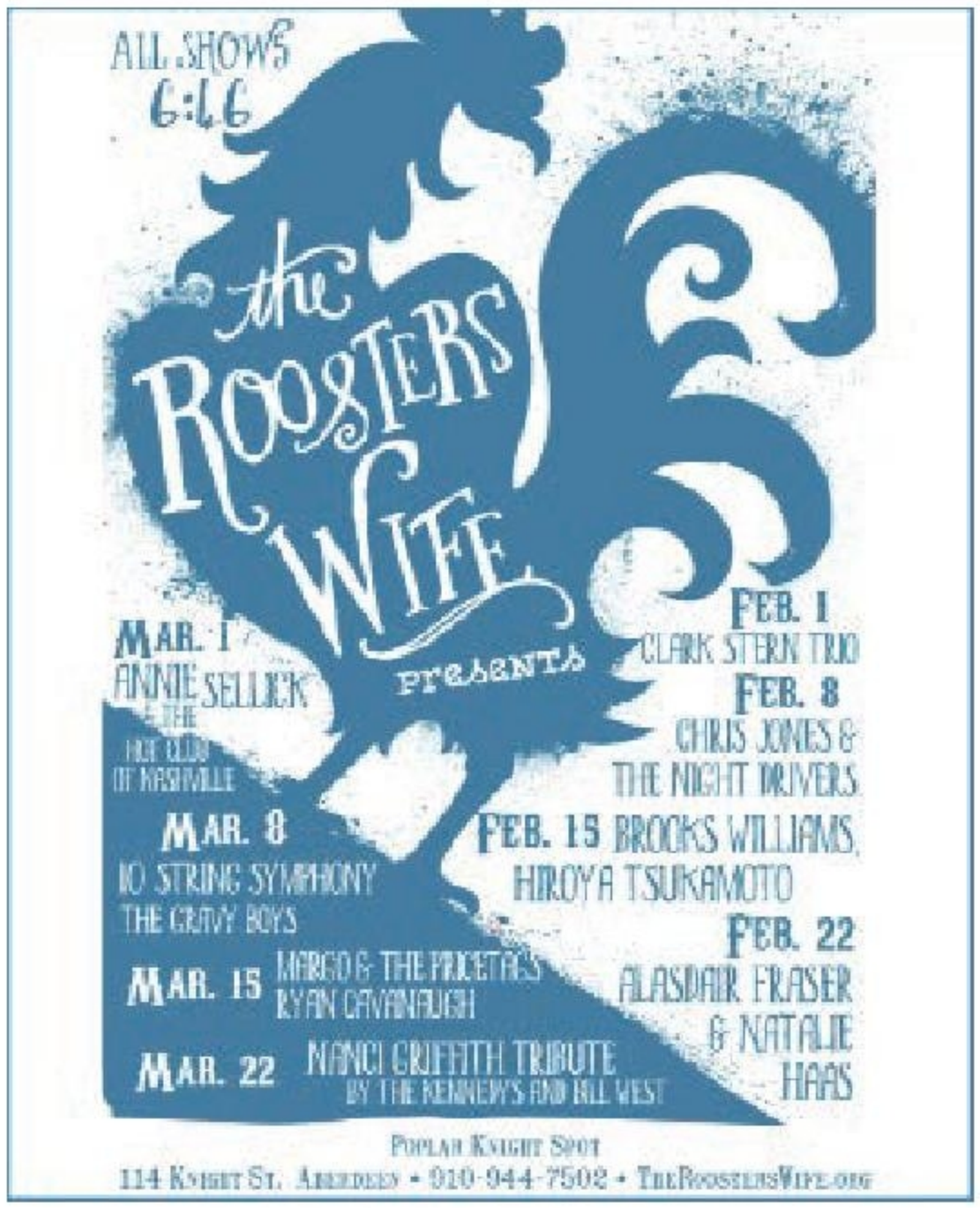

Local Hero

The tale of how an out of work painter went up a billboard and saved a season. Can the ultimate Hornets fan, Dennis Easterling, do it again?

By Wiley Cash

Today is December 6, 2014, and the Charlotte Hornets' record stands at 5-15. They haven't won two in a row since early November.

It may surprise you — I know it surprised me — but this is the second time the Hornets have been 5-15 on December 6. The first time it happened was in 1991; that team hadn't won two in a row since mid-November. Their losing record and dearth of back-to-back wins came in spite of solid play from guards Muggsy Bogues and Kendall Gill and forward Larry Johnson, who would go on to be the NBA's Rookie of the Year. Truth is the Hornets were exploited at the center position, finishing in the middle of the league in rebounds and last in blocked shots. At only six-foot-nine, Chapel Hill standout J. R. Reid couldn't dominate in the NBA like he had in college, and minutes were limited for former Duke star Mike Gminski. There seemed to be nothing the Hornets could do to make up for their lack of a serviceable big man.

That's when a 42-year-old painting contractor offered the height the Hornets needed, and with that height came the perspective that many of the team's fans had lost.

Don't get me wrong; Dennis Easterling isn't a tall man, but what he did was big. On December 6, 1991, he set up camp on a LongHorn Steakhouse billboard on East Independence Boulevard and announced he wouldn't come down until the Hornets won two in a row. Unfortunately for Mr. Easterling — and the Hornets — he'd be up there until January 9.

In a recent phone conversation, I asked Mr. Easterling why he did it. "I got up there because it was my soapbox to tell everybody not to get down on the Hornets," he said. "People were expressing all this negativity, and I got up there to make a positive statement. My slogan was 'You Gotta Believe.'"

Mr. Easterling wanted fans to remember what their support meant to the Hornets, even in the toughest of times. "I was at the old coliseum for the first game they ever played," he told me. "We lost by 46 points, and after the game the crowd stood and gave them a standing ovation. We were just so happy to have a team."

Charlotte basketball fans — most of whom had grown up cheering for Chapel Hill, Duke or North Carolina State — were used to winning, but they kept the faith when the Hornets won only twenty games during the 1988-89 season, which seemed like the good old days when they only won nineteen the following year. They increased their total by seven the next season, but they still finished at the bottom of their division and fired coach Gene Littles.

Only two months into the fourth season and the team was already down, and that's why Dennis Easterling was the perfect hero; he was down too. "I was out of work," he said. "I'd hurt my back in the painting business, and I didn't work for about nine months. I got together with a friend who did local promotions, and we came up with the idea."

It turns out that aside from boosting fans' spirits during their commutes, Mr. Easterling was also promoting something that would boost fans' spirits at games. "I'd invented a little foam stinger, a product like the foam tomahawk used at Braves' games, and I was hoping to get that started in the Coliseum so people could cheer with something instead of just sitting on their hands."

So here he was, this contractor turned creator turned daredevil Hornets' fan who was given a view of Charlotte that few citizens will ever have, but that wasn't necessarily a new perspective for Mr. Easterling. "I've lived in Charlotte my whole life," he said when I asked about how the view from his perch on Independence affected his perception of the Queen City. "We used to drag race on Independence on Friday nights, and now there are stoplights everywhere. The city's grown: high-rises, the number of people. An old codger like me misses the old days."

But there are days Mr. Easterling doesn't miss, and most of them revolve around former Hornets' owner George Shinn. "He really brought down the fans' fever. All his shenanigans: threatening to leave unless we built a new arena with a bunch of skyboxes. Finally he did leave, and we were glad to see him go. He tarnished the glory of how great it was to have an NBA team in Charlotte."

Now the Hornets are back, and those days of believing have returned. "The most positive thing that's happened has been Michael Jordan taking over ownership," Mr Easterling said. "The buzz is back again."

Mr. Easterling knows things can change, both over the course of decades and over the course of an NBA season. "I finally came down after thirty-five days and the Hornets went on to fall just one game shy of making the playoffs." They'd draft Alonzo Mourning with the second overall pick, and the following season would be one of the best in the team's history, winning forty-four games and making it all the way to the second round of the playoffs.

When I asked Mr. Easterling about the current Hornets squad, he admitted they're off to a rocky start. "But I've got something up my sleeve," he said. "I'm working with the Hornets. The only thing I can say is that we're waiting on an NBA license." That something up the sleeve may be just what these second generation Hornets need. Maybe Dennis Easterling can do it again.

Editors Note: As of publication time in mid-January, the Hornets' record stands at 15-24, just two games out of third place in the Southeast Conference of Eastern Conference.

Wiley Cash is a New York Times *best-selling author whose second novel,* This Dark Road to Mercy, *was released in January 2014. He lives in Wilmington.*

Temple of the Emerald Buddha

A journey to beautiful Wat Carolina monastery in Bolivia takes our adventurous outdoor writer to a new place – within

Story and Photographs by Virginia Holman

What I wanted was a roadmap out of the swamp, metaphorically speaking. Fall had left me frayed. As much as I find solace in the out-of-doors — the fields, the water, the woods — the preceding months had me asking big thorny questions about life. A former classmate died too young, marriages of friends near and far ended, people I care about saw their lives change forever by the violence of another. I reached out, I helped, I offered comfort again and again, but it had begun to waste me to witness so much pain in such a short span of time. I wanted, more than anything, to be far away from this sort of wilderness, to find refuge.

Serendipitously, I'd slotted February on my calendar for an excursion to Wat Carolina, the Buddhist monastery located in Bolivia, North Carolina. I looked forward to exploring the 25-acre grounds and speaking with the Theravada Buddhist monks there, more as a curiosity-seeker than anything else. Years ago, an acquaintance of mine named Monika had found a strong sense of peace and strength at the Wat during the last two years of her life. At her memorial service under the weather-gnarled oaks at Fort Fisher, two monks spoke briefly about Monika and offered a blessing. They wore elegant burnt orange robes, and their movements were delicate, but not frail. Because they were so different from everyone else at the ceremony, they had seemed vaguely glamorous. I knew nothing about Buddhism, so I only saw surfaces.

When my existential crisis hit this fall, I found myself asking quite urgent questions about how to sustain the spirit. People find guidance through life's confusion via communities of worship, family, friends, psychologists, music, art. When I'd reflect on the past few months, I kept coming back to one word: compassion. I kept coming back to one image: Monika's monks under the oaks. So, I decided to take a short spiritual journey to Wat Carolina, to see what I could find there.

When I looked at Google Maps for directions to the monastery from my home in Carolina Beach, I was amused. My route looked like something out of an ancient storybook: *Travel to the end of the land. Board a ferry across a deep and turbulent river. Take the Dantesque-named Midway Road until you near the confluence of Hog Branch and Half Hell Swamps. You have arrived at the temple.* Really, who could resist such a map? My actual journey was a bit more straightforward: after the ferry crossing, I headed south on 211 until I hit "Worms and Coffee" (locals know the spot), swung a right, and drove down a long country road. I passed a Baptist church, two charmingly named roads (Backwater Trail and Straight and Narrow Way), and a raffle of twenty wild turkey hens out for a stroll, before I arrived at the Wat. I can't say it was a mystical journey, but it was a pleasant winter's drive in my truck.

I arrived without an appointment, so I was cheered to see the large "Visitors Welcome" sign at the gate. The Wat is on a heavily wooded property at the bottom of a slight slope. There's a small residence for the monk and a dramatic, steep-roofed yellow and red multipurpose building that houses a large temple. Wat Carolina is the year-round home of its founder, Abbot Phrakru Buddamonpricha, and one monk, Phra Boonrat. I'd missed the daily service on the morning of my visit, arriving just as Phra Boonrat was beginning his only meal of the day. The Abbot was away for the week. The caretaker, a quiet Colombian man named José, told me I could stroll around the grounds and the temple while I waited.

Before I ventured into the temple, I paused for several minutes before a large etiquette sign. It explained proper conduct in the presence of a monk. For instance, monks do not shake hands; rather one should place her hands together in front of the heart and bow slightly. It also listed particular requirements for women: modest dress is required; when one is offering a monk food at the daily service, the monk cannot accept the offering directly from a woman's hands. Instead, it must first be placed on a special cloth. There was also a list of temple protocol: Remove your shoes before entering; never extend your legs and soles of your feet toward the shrine; at a service, approach the shrine on your knees. All of this was new to me, and I was grateful for the information.

I unlaced my hiking boots, placed them by the sliding glass doors, and entered the silent temple. Light streamed in from the eastern windows. The centerpiece of the shrine was a fifteen-foot tall, serene-faced, emerald green Buddha. Beneath the Buddha a multitude of smaller Buddhas — some golden, others made of brass and green glass — glowed and glinted faintly in the dappled light. There were vases of vibrant silk flowers, a small potted tree with heart-shaped leaves, and a row of beveled glass orbs. The arrangement was ornate and softly radiant, somehow alive.

"This area is used for festivals," José told me when he entered with Phra Boonrat. "We get sometimes 200 people for the water festival." He explained that the festival, Songkran, is a celebration of the Thai new year.

The monk and I talked haltingly for a while. Though he is still learning to speak English, his comprehension was quite good. However, since my Thai is nonexistent, our conversation consisted of basic information gathering. I learned that Wat Carolina was founded in 1987 by the Abbot. Monks cannot eat any food not offered to them. Phra Boonrat has been at Wat Carolina for three years. Most intriguing to me: I discovered the Abbot will teach meditation to anyone who asks. Phra Boonrat then asked me if I knew much about Buddhism. When I shook my head, he brought over a small board and gently guided me through the basics. At the end, he said that Buddhism takes many years of practice to understand.

"I'm a slow learner in everything," I laughed and he did too. I found it reassuring that the Buddhist ways also seemed slow and incremental.

When the lesson was complete, Phra Boonrat invited me back on Sunday, so I could meet some of the community members and attend a service. José gave me a stack of books to help me with some of the basics.

That Sunday, I returned with my husband. Congregants gathered not in the temple of the emerald Buddha, but in a small house at the front of property. This area houses the monk's sleeping quarters, a small kitchen, a large, airy, plant-filled gathering area, and a small area for worship with an elaborate shrine. The space was comfortable, yet quite modest and intimate — the room was the size of a small living room. When I peeked around the kitchen corner, I saw Phra Boonrat seated on a slightly elevated platform as he waited for the congregants to gather.

I understood from my reading that at each service food is offered to the monk, so my husband and I brought a small bag of fruit. The congregants immediately welcomed us. A small group of about fifteen gathered, most of whom were Thai, though the temple also has members who are Lao, Vietnamese and Cambodian. Three of the women, Suparp Schroeder, Prapha Upright and Slena Coutcer, adopted us into the fold and explained how the food would be arrayed before Phra Boonrat, how to enter on our knees, and how to offer food to the monk. Midway through the service, we would break to eat. Then we'd return for a short ceremony so the monk could bless water to honor our deceased ancestors.

My husband had been curious to visit the Wat, but as I watched him during the service that morning, he seemed happily distracted by the food. The dishes prepared for the monk were spectacular: sticky rice, papaya salad, sun-dried beef, and spicy chicken and pork dishes were arranged on a cloth in front of the monk. The ceremony itself was conducted in Thai, and I was a little disappointed not to understand the words being spoken. The monk chanted, the congregants responded from time to time, and Slena would whisper to me, letting me know what would happen next. She guided my husband and me through the particulars of offering the food, and then we broke for lunch. Phra Boonrat ate his one meal of the day in a separate area.

Over lunch I discovered that Slena, Suparp and Prapha had driven to the Wat from Fayetteville, two hours away. They'd risen at 4 a.m. to cook. "That's quite a drive," I said to Slena. She said that though there are temples near her home in Fayetteville, she feels a particular calm at this temple. Other congregants had come from Jacksonville and Myrtle Beach to worship. Suparp said Wat Carolina was a special place to her, and that the Abbot here was particularly good at teaching meditation.

"You should come," she said. "He will work with you. Meditation has changed my life. You don't have to be Thai or Buddhist to learn. He'll teach you."

As we chatted, Slena told me that she is not Buddhist; she was raised as a Seventh Day Adventist. Her parents were missionaries and lived all over the world. "So many countries, I can't count all of them." However, she attends services at the Wat because it keeps her in touch with the Thai community and customs. I was relieved that my husband and I weren't the only non-Buddhists in attendance.

"You should come back in April for the water festival," said Suparp.

"Are outsiders welcome?" I asked. I worried that my husband and I might be seen as interlopers, since we aren't Thai or looking to become Buddhist. We just want to learn more.

"Of course. We get all sorts of people at the festivals," Suparp said.

Then Slena beamed at me. "Yes, everyone is welcome. Everyone!"

I have a feeling we'll be back.

Interested in visiting Wat Carolina?
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Author Virginia Holman teaches in the creative writing department at UNC Wilmington and occasionally guides with Kayak Carolina.

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Mr. Moore's Sophomore Biology

Dissecting frogs and what I wanted
was to see the inside of a thing
how its heart kept beating when
all around there was heartbreak,
Dina saying we should be friends now
Dad saying he was going to move out for a bit
and there lay the frog, flayed open, white,
no blood, but of course, this was
something without a beating heart
because those we don't get to see
and all we can do is imagine
the way they squeeze and beat and open
and close and there is Mr. Moore
at the front of the class
talking kidney, talking liver, lungs, all these organs
that meant nothing to me when all I ever wanted
was to get to the heart of things.

— Steve Cushman

The Art of Romance

So, we wondered, how do you "see" the love of your life – and they you?

By Ashley Wahl · Photographs by Mark Steelman

Inspired by a social media video where couples were asked to sketch their significant others by memory – a task easier said than done and best when approached with a sense of humor – we reached out to our friends at the Cameron Art Museum in attempt to recreate a similar exercise at The Museum School as our humble tribute to the Feast of Saint Valentine. Our hope was to round up a handful of local artists whose dearly beloveds aren't necessarily gifted in the realm of drawing, but that each would take a turn sketching his or her sweetheart for the sheer purpose of sharing a laugh together. Executive Director Anne Brennan suggested we level the playing field. Rather than sketching from memory, she proposed, what if we asked our couples to try blind contour drawing, a humbling and intimate exercise during which the artist must use one continuous line to capture exterior and interior contours of the model without looking at the paper. "The exercise is very slow and deliberate," says CAM Museum School Director Donna Moore, who led our four couples through this "Art of Romance" experiment on a recent winter evening. "Through the path of a wandering line, some likeness almost always shows up and surprises by capturing expression in a fluid traveling manner."

As you'll see, our four plucky couples were game. But what was most surprising was how this simple exercise became a beautiful celebration of their love affairs.

It's been said that love is blind. See for yourself.

The Museum School at CAM is located at 3201 South Seventeenth Street, Wilmington. Registration for Winter Session II is open; classes start on February 22, including Drawing Fundamentals with Todd Carignan. Download the 2015 catalog at cameronartmuseum.org/museumschool.

…what if we asked our couples to try blind contour drawing…

When he's in the room, I can't help but smile.

Dating since October 2012
Tom Cox & Kirah Van Sickle

The Law of Mutual Attraction

Tom's day job: Attorney at law

Kirah's day job: Visual artist, illustrator and art instructor

How they met: After being introduced at an after-work professional happy hour, their first date was months later at a fundraising gala for Dreams of Wilmington.

Tom as artist: When Kirah first described what we would be doing, I looked at her face and realized that I had never looked at her in that way before. I was worried that my drawing would look like a lot of scribbling, but it turned out OK.

Kirah as artist: It is nice to take the opportunity to really look at your partner. I liked the intimacy of it, being able to encourage each other, and in the end, to do what I think connects us and do it well together . . . laugh!

Tom of Kirah: I love the anticipation and excitement of what the future will bring with her beside me as my friend, lover, partner and confidant.

Kirah of Tom: When he's in the room, I can't help but smile.

… I looked — really looked — and saw the elegant fellow I fell in love with forty years ago.

Married since April 1975
Paul W. Overman & Paula Recko

Drawing on Wisdom and Creativity

Paul's day job: Licensed clinical psychologist who specializes in dreams and creativity

Paula's day job: Artist (watercolor and colored pencil) and art administration

How they met: At a party in Cincinnati, Ohio, 1973

Pet names: None they will ever divulge.

Paul as artist: I haven't really drawn since I was a boy, and then only mountain ranges and facial profiles of a cowboy. I felt like I didn't know what I was doing, but attempting to sketch Paula's face was a comfort, as I felt her support.

Paula as artist and model: During the few short minutes I drew Paul, I looked — really looked — and saw the elegant fellow I fell in love with forty years ago. As I posed for Paul, I could sense his unease. However, I found his portrait of me sweet and touching.

Paul of Paula: I was first attracted to Paula's beauty, inner presence and graceful connection with me, others in the room and the spaces she entered. She is caring and devoted and has a passion for life which I feel every day in our friendship and marriage partnership.

Paula of Paul: Paul completes me. I am earthy, practical and grounded. He is spiritual, aesthetic and cerebral. He is unfailingly ethical and honest and much too humble. His knowledge has evolved into wisdom.

We did a lot of laughing as we drew and modeled.

Married since May 2003

Peter & Abby Spangel Perry

Quality Time for Mom and Dad

Peter's day job: CAT scan technologist

Abby's day job: Art instructor at Cape Fear Community College

How they met: Peter was delivering ice for Rose Ice & Coal Co. Abby was waitressing at Shell Island Resort. This was 1996. A mutual friend set them up on a first date and, says Peter, the rest is history.

Pet names: Sweet Pea and Tootsie Roll

Peter as artist: I have only drawn Abby once in my life and I think my blind contour was better. We did a lot of laughing as we drew and modeled. I think we needed this distraction from the trials of parenthood. It was a good time.

Abby as model: I felt the urge to giggle more than anything. Being parents of a young child and working opposite schedules, we rarely have quality time together or to ourselves. This allowed us to slow down and look one another in the eye. It was a very appreciated exercise.

Peter of Abby: Abby is grounded, honest, beautiful, and one of the smartest people I know.

Abby of Peter: I was initially attracted to Peter by looks but immediately discovered a very funny, fun-loving, sweet and sincere person. I am still in love with him for all the same reasons.

Married since September 1962
Robert & Anne Van Blarcom Kurowski

Still Drawn Together After All These Years

Robert's day job: High school art teacher (retired); sax player and singer (Baby Boomer Band)

Anne's day job: Artist

How they met: Bob was playing saxophone at Anne's sorority beach house in Asbury Park, New Jersey, 1959. When Anne first saw Bob, she says she loved him then and there.

Robert as artist: This was my first drawing after fifteen years. I gave my pen and pencil up for the saxophone.

Anne as artist and model: I think he did capture me in one of the drawings. I was disappointed that I left out the eyes in all of my drawings.

Robert of Anne: Lucky me.

Anne of Robert: I knew way back that he would be fun to grow old with, and he is. He has the ability to bloom wherever he is planted, appreciate the now and live in the moment. Any annoying habits just become endearing qualities. Bob has been the most supportive and loving partner anyone could have.

The Real Arthur Newman

In the effort to make non-golfing Colin Firth appear to be a legitimate player, Cape Fear head professional Joey Hines created real Hollywood magic

By Jason Frye · Photographs by Mark Steelman

I'm not saying you should watch *Arthur Newman* — about the only worthwhile thing in the film is Emily Blunt's dead sexy Southern accent — but if you happen to be on the couch when it's on and you find yourself watching it, you'll recognize many a Wilmington location. After all, the 2012 dramatic comedy was shot all across eastern North Carolina, from Raleigh to Wallace to Carolina Beach and Fort Fisher to downtown Wilmington. There's one other thing you'll recognize: extras. When I watched *Arthur Newman*, I saw a pair of actors I count as good friends, another pair I know by name, and another half dozen I recognize from TV, film and around town.

Among those extras is a man you only catch a glimpse of, though his work was instrumental to the film. Joey Hines, director of golf at Cape Fear Country Club, appears at 1:03:30 having a drink at the Terre Haute Country Club bar (which looks suspiciously like the Cape Fear Country Club). He's wearing a pink golf sweater, the same one he's wearing about a minute prior when he hits a beaut of a tee shot in the background of another scene.

It makes sense. Hines is a golf professional and so is Colin Firth's Arthur Newman. What doesn't make sense, though, is the fact that Firth plays a golf pro. He can't play golf.

Between takes while filming the scene where Firth chokes on a bite of hot dog (cut to a convenient flashback to him choking in a golf tournament — he hits a beautiful shot out of a greenside bunker then lips out on a three-foot putt — but more on that later), Hines struck up a conversation with Firth.

"I asked him if he played golf, seemed like a natural question, but when he said no, I wasn't quite sure what to make of it. I mean, how the hell do you make a golf movie and you don't play golf? So, I asked him," Hines says.

Firth's reply: "The magic of Hollywood."

Later that day, one of the directors asked Hines if he minded teeing up and

hitting a few balls so they could shoot him and use it to run over the credits and in other long shots.

"I knew Colin couldn't do it, so I was happy to."

So he did, and thus was born the Hollywood career of Joey Hines.

Hines' brief but brilliant arc in the film about a former pro golfer who fakes his own death and invents the identity of Arthur Newman, golf pro, didn't end with a few long shots of him hitting golf balls. That was only the beginning.

When a production assistant was looking for extras to fill out a scene, Hines recalled hearing, "That guy, put him in the bar scene. He looks like a golf pro in that pink sweater."

"They were pointing at me," says Hines. "I was just standing there in my usual work clothes thinking, 'He looks like a golf pro? I should, I *am* a golf pro.'"

They sent him to wardrobe. Wardrobe sent him straight back. "They said I looked the part."

Go figure.

Hines had to do more than just look good in his pink sweater. Firth turned to him for actual golf advice.

"The scene where he shows Emily Blunt how to putt, before they started shooting, he pulled me aside and I knew what he was going to say: He didn't know how to putt. So I showed him how to do it, then I showed him how I'd teach someone," Hines says. Then he gets up and shows me, standing opposite, walking through the steps of holding the putter, wrapping the fingers and striking the imaginary ball.

"I'd do it just like this, showing you while you mirrored me, then we'd putt and I'd make corrections. We started going over it and the director came over and said it just wouldn't work."

Hines knew exactly where he was going: Firth behind Blunt, his arms wrapped around her, them swaying in unison hitting ball after ball into a cup a few feet away.

"Oh, it's sexy and it looks better on screen, but if I did that, I'd be fired."

Flash forward to a lesson a few days later. Hines is on the practice tee when his phone rings.

"I don't normally have my phone, but that day, I did for some reason. Anyway, it rings and I pick up. A voice says, 'Joey, it's Colin. I got a problem.'"

Firth was shooting that choking scene and he needed to hit a ball out of a greenside bunker and land it within putting distance of the hole. All while a crowd of extras ringed the green. But he can't swing a club, much less hit a ball.

Hines left for the set and some emergency golf pro-ing.

"When I got there and saw what he needed to do — hit out of the bunker with that picture-perfect splash of sand following the ball — I knew we were in trouble."

He grabbed a club and a ball, dropped it into the bunker and hit out the perfect shot. The sand splashed, the ball arced high, landed, and rolled within easy putting distance. The director saw Hines' shot and ran over. "That. That. I need *him* to do *that*." He pointed from Firth to the ball and back.

"No way. I told him no way and he about lost it," says Hines. "I've played for forty years and hit a hell of a lot of shots out of bunkers and that's not the kind of thing you can show someone — especially someone who's not a golfer — to do in a few minutes."

Still, he tried, or rather, they tried. Hines set up ball after ball in the bunker and had Firth take swings at it. He hit the top of the ball, missed to the right and left, grounded the club in the sand and knocked it from his own hand.

"He couldn't hit shit," Hines says with a laugh. "I've never seen anything like it. We hit seventy-five, 100 balls and he dribbled maybe twenty of them out of the bunker. No way he was going to hit it out, carry the sand, and land it on the green. I thought he'd kill an extra."

Hines got to thinking about that "Hollywood magic" Firth talked about the first day they met.

"I got an idea and took the club back into the bunker. 'Film this,' I said, then I hit that shot again. And again. And again while they filmed. I told the director that we could use my shot, my ball landing and the crowd's reaction, and fake Colin hitting the ball. The effects folks could just put a ball in later. He liked that."

Hollywood magic.

So Hines got a piece of plywood, put it in the bunker out of the camera's view, and built little volcanoes of sand.

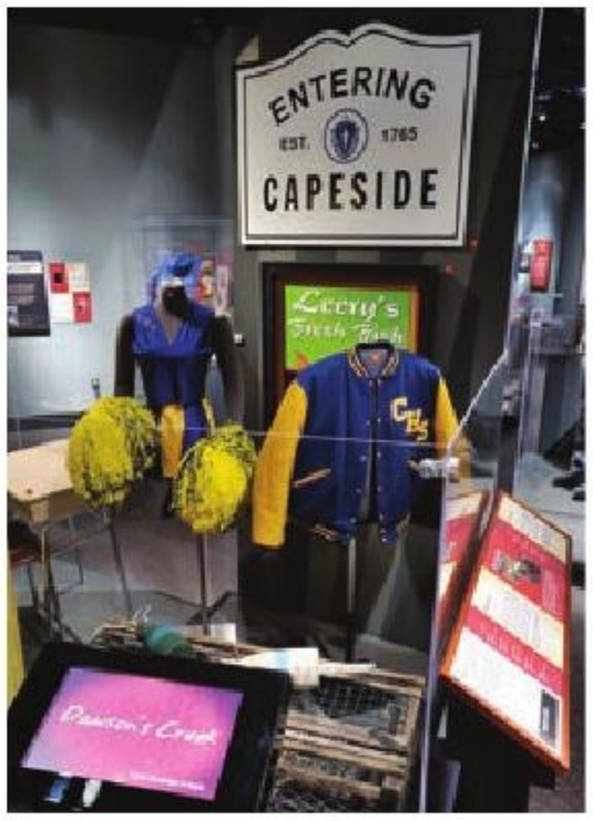
"Me and Colin practiced swinging, practiced that finishing pose," he mocks a swing and freezes at the perfect moment. "Then I had him hit the sand volcanoes, whacking nothing but sand into the air. When he had that about right, I made some more volcanoes, got out of the shot and they started rolling."

They got the shot they needed. Firth swings and sand flies and though the swing's a little awkward, it's passable.

"After my day of being an extra — and I do mean a day, it seemed like twelve hours for a twelve-second scene — and coaching Colin, easily my toughest client, through those shots, we joked that I'd never take up acting as a career if he didn't take up golfing as his. It was an easy deal to make."

The State of Filmmaking

As a stunning new exhibition reveals, all 100 counties of North Carolina have starred in more than 3,000 films and TV shows shot in the Old North State since 1912



PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE N.C. MUSEUM OF HISTORY

"Oh! A real story. Intrigue! Danger! New outfits! And it's mine, mine, mine, all mine, a ha ha ha ha . . . (to camera) Oh, come on, please, you think Ted Koppel never gets excited?" Miss Piggy, Muppets From Space

By Gwenyfar Rohler

In one sentence, Camille Hunt, registrar at the North Carolina Museum of History, sums up the vast leaps of filmmaking technology in the last one hundred years: Once a special occasion that involved getting dressed up to go to the one theater in town, she points out, movie-going has evolved in such a way that it's now possible to watch a movie anywhere — even through the display screen of your phone.

Arguably, since the printing press, few other inventions have influenced as many lives as motion picture technology. We are standing in the *Starring North Carolina!* exhibit that opened at the Raleigh museum in November, which is located right next door to our historic State Capital building. For two and a half years, Hunt and a team of nearly twenty others have worked to produce this ambitious exhibit, which celebrates our state's rich history of filmmaking and spans over one hundred years.

"We had an exhibit on *Gone With the Wind*," says Hunt, recalling the genesis of the idea. "We had costumes, Vivien Leigh costumes, Clark Gable costumes, Vivien Leigh's Oscar, costume sketches, production sketches . . . This was about the same time *Iron Man 3* was being filmed; *The Hunger Games* had come out." Hunt found herself asking colleagues, "What else might have happened? We should do an exhibit on North Carolina film." Behind us on a big screen, a clip from *Muppets From Space* ends and part of the pilot episode of *Sleepy Hollow* cues up. There are a couple of rows of theater seats bolted to the floor from the old Galaxy Cinema in Cary. "It was interesting to work with the studios to get permission to use the clips," Hunt says, grinning.

"Oh, this is my favorite scene from *Bull Durham*!" I turn to her as the players circle the pitcher's mound in the throes of crisis. "Nobody knows what to get Jimmy and Millie for the wedding!" We both laugh and nod. Hunt's lovely dark hair frames a face that, at least when she talks about movies, smiles constantly all the way to her twinkling eyes. "We figure this is one of the most iconic North Carolina-made movies, and it is unique in that it was made in North Carolina and set in North Carolina. That's kind of rare because a lot of the time North Carolina stands in for another place, so it's neat when we get to be the star as well, you know?" The 1988 film, starring Susan Sarandon, Kevin Costner and Tim Robbins, was produced by NC native Thom Mount and put North Carolina and a minor league baseball team, the Durham Bulls, on the map.

Hunt recalls that while researching the exhibit she and one of the curators, Katie Edwards,

commented that it felt like "the more we found, the more we found. We would meet a person, and they would say, 'Oh! You have to talk to so-and-so!' Everyone we talked to was passionate about the project. It's clear that people in North Carolina are super proud of the industry."

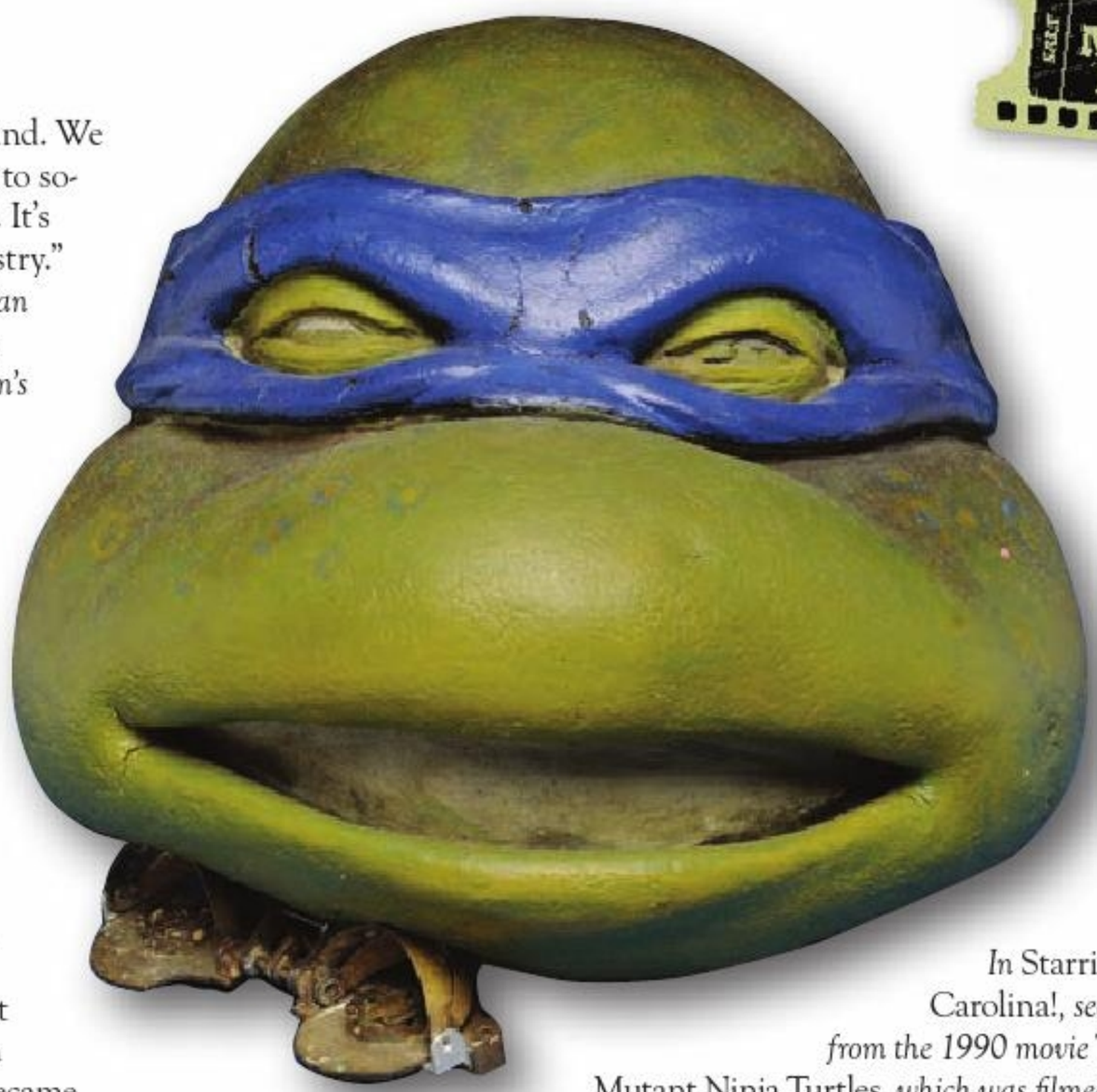
And what's not to be proud of? Our résumé includes: *Iron Man 3, Journey 2: The Mysterious Island, Dirty Dancing, The Last of the Mohicans, Being There, Safe Haven, The Secret Life of Bees, Dawson's Creek, Homeland, Matlock, Blue Velvet, Cat's Eye* . . . and 2,988 more films currently celebrated in the exhibit.

Like many North Carolinians, and specifically Wilmingtonians, I am well-versed in the litany: Dino De Laurentiis came here for *Firestarter* with Drew Barrymore in 1983. He so enjoyed burning Orton Plantation for the film and was taken with our low cost of business and the possibilities that a right-to-work state (as opposed to a state where unions were strong) offered a movie producer — that he built a studio here. The rest, as they say, is history.

But according to Hunt, filmmaking in NC actually began in 1912.

"We found that productions had gone back over one-hundred years — the earliest we found was a 1912 production called *The Heart of Esmeralda*, which was filmed in the mountains." It was at The Esmeralda Inn, near Chimney Rock and Lake Lure. The Inn has had quite a strong film connection since then: apparently it became a hide-away spot for silent film stars like Mary Pickford, Gloria Swanson, Douglas Fairbanks and Clark Gable. Screenwriters went there for retreats, and Lew Wallace claimed to have finished the script for *Ben-Hur* in room No. 9. After a lull that lasted a couple of decades, the film industry rediscovered the Inn and, among other films in the area, *Dirty Dancing*, the coming of age classic with Jennifer Grey and Patrick Swayze, landed here. When the Inn was restored following a fire in 1997, the dance floor from the film was installed in the lobby. (Am I the only woman in the world who quivers at the thought of twirling my way across Johnny Castle's dance floor? I can't be.)

Behind us a black and white silent movie clip is playing on a continuous loop. "We get into the NC connection to filmmaking [with] silent films in 1921." Hunt gestures to *The Lost Colony* film made in Manteo. This film was the foundation and inspiration for *The Lost Colony* play that Paul Green would write and produce in 1937. "Part of what I find interesting about this is that the writer and director were both women, and at the time that was unusual —"



In Starring North Carolina!, *see a mask from the 1990 movie* Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, *which was filmed in North Carolina. Loan courtesy of the Cape Fear Museum of History and Science, Wilmington, N.C.*

Actor Kevin Costner wore this bomber jacket in the 1988 movie Bull Durham, *which was filmed in North Carolina. Loan courtesy of Thom Mount.*

Ricky Bobby's No. 26 Wonder Bread race car from the 2006 movie Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby. *The 2006 Chevrolet, currently on view in the museum lobby, is on loan from International Motorsports Hall of Fame in Talladega, Alabama, and from Shell Oil.*

I interrupt Hunt.

"It still is."

"No, you're right," she nods. "It still is."

We turn another corner and are greeted by the black and white screen movie clip of two men talking at a piano. "This is *Pitch a Boogie Woogie*, which was made in Greenville in the 1940s." Featuring an all-African-American cast that includes a lot of Greenville locals and some big name touring dancers and musicians of the era, Hunt explains that, originally, "the movie was mostly shown in African-American theaters in the Greenville area." It was lost and almost forgotten until a print was discovered while restoring the Roxy Theatre in Greenville. "A professor at ECU, Alex Albright, had rediscovered the film and took charge of getting it resurrected. They did a re-release in 1986," Hunt elaborates. Watching the clips run I feel like I'm at an early screening from Cine Noir, the African-American Independent Film Festival (now renamed the North Carolina Black Film Festival). That same excitement and verve of independent storytelling comes through on the screen. But before I can get too proud of the strong heritage of African-American art in our state, I am reminded of the flip side of our history by a copy of *The Clansman*, a novel by Thomas F. Dixon, in a display case. It was turned into a film by D.W. Griffith titled *The Birth of a Nation*.

"The author was from here," Hunt reminds me.

"Yeah, Thomas F. Dixon . . ." I trail off thinking about *Birth of Nation* (which he co-write the screenplay for) and the sequel, *The Fall of a Nation*, which he wrote and directed. Two sides of the early NC filmmaking coin jingle in my head.

"Here we enter the heart of the exhibit: modern movies!" Hunt almost squeals with delight. Again, expecting to start with *Firestarter* or *Cat's Eye*, I am surprised that instead we are at the 1956 Grace Kelly film *The Swan*, as part of an interactive display on Biltmore Estate's many uses as a filming location. "It was the last movie she made before she became a princess," Hunt smiles as she lifts a section of the 2-D Biltmore House to reveal the information. Apparently one of Elvis' last movies was also made in NC: *Speedway* (1968), co-starring Nancy Sinatra.

Speaking of Elvis, the costume Earl Owensby wore in his tribute film *Living Legend: The King of Rock and Roll* (1980) is on display on a mannequin in a glass case. The film also co-stared Ginger Alden, Elvis' fiancée at the time of his death.

"I'm so glad to see you included Earl Owensby," I comment to Hunt.

"We love him!" She gushes. "Everyone we talked to . . . the film commissioner at the time . . . Bill Vassar at Screen Gems . . . everyone said, 'You have to include Earl Owensby. He was the pioneer of movie-making in North Carolina. He was just a guy who wanted to make movies and he did.'"

That's probably the simplest description of Owensby possible. He wasn't just a kid with a camera and a dream. Known as the "Dixie DeMille" in the 1970s, he built a 200-acre studio facility with eight sound stages, a water tank for filming, an airport runway, and now an on-site hotel for housing cast and crew. He didn't come from an old movie-making family in California. He was a North Carolina boy who came home from the Marine Corps and decided he wanted to make movies. In the next few decades, he would write, direct, act in and produce over forty feature films through Earl Owensby Studios, just outside the small town of Shelby, North Carolina.

Behind us is the display commemorating the De Laurentiis and Capra connection to Wilmington. "This was Frank Capra's desk, which is housed at Screen Gems." Hunt points out the magazine on the desk with a cover shot of Orton Plantation, noting that it was the inspiration for bringing Capra, Jr. and De Laurentiis to the area for *Firestarter*. Ahh, here we are on familiar ground, I think.

Cocktail napkins with dark blue writing commemorate the union of Betty and Jake . . . I look up to see Alan Alda's picture smiling at me. "Oh my gosh! It's party favors from the wedding in *Betsy's Wedding*!" I exclaim. "Yeah, and to me that's another interesting thing about movie-making," says Hunt. "Some company had to make these — and that's another industry that feeds into the filmmaking companies." She is preaching to the choir on this one. All I can think about is the number of times book rentals to film productions have paid the mortgage or payroll for the bookstore I own.

"This is the desk from *Crimes of the Heart* . . ." Hunt begins to explain another artifact to me. "Madeline's desk!" I interrupt, again, searching the signage for explanation. "Yes, there, it's from John Bankson." Bankson is local props master in the film industry, and after the film this desk had gone to live in his teenage daughter's room. Hunt gives me a surprised look and nods. "We had to wait until she went to college before we could pick up the desk."

I had warned Hunt at the beginning that part of this was going to feel like old home week for me. But as we wind our way through various Wilmingtonians featured in the exhibit, Jeff McKay, Jayme Bednarczyk and Jeff Goodwin, I just swell with pride at their recognition.

Hunt steers us into a part of the exhibit about how the movie-going experience has changed over the years. "These are seats from a segregated theater in Carrboro," she begins, adding that the exhibit also talks about "tri-racial segregation, which a lot of people don't know about." She points to a picture of the exterior of a movie theater in Robeson County. "Whites, blacks and American Indians . . . this is the one where you can see the three doors." It starts to feel like every time I get lost in the adulation of the glamour of the film world, something here snaps me back to reality and the darker side of our history.

We pass out of that room and into the final room of the exhibit with more recent films, and I am startled that the only nod to *The Crow* (1994) is a framed promotional poster on the wall. I ask, because it was one of our darker moments when Brandon Lee lost his life on the set. Hunt explains that they had trouble finding artifacts from it, and that there are so many films to celebrate it would difficult to do large displays of all of them.

She's right. We haven't even begun the Nicholas Sparks era of filming or any of the days of Capeside or Tree Hill High. Large display cases filled with costumes, props and signed memorabilia fill the center of the room. As we move forward, another case with *Sleepy Hollow* materials looms ahead.

"Have you seen it?" Hunt asks me.

"Actually, they were filming an episode in my bookstore yesterday."

"Really?" she asks.

I nod. "Well, it's a very book-oriented show."

"Who was there?" she inquires.

"The leads," I answer, ready to leave it there. But I cave and give in to her pleading look. "Tom Mison was there. He's very charming and very smart and very generous in real life."

She grins and ducks her head a bit. Then we get back to the serious work looking at the overwhelming number of films and TV shows that have flooded the state since 1984. "And we didn't even have room to include made-for-TV movies" she points out. I had almost forgotten about the genre that dominated the entertainment industry in my childhood and is now virtually extinct.

But the coup de grâce is an interactive screen at the end. "We have found films made in every one of the one hundred counties in the state," Hunt informs me with pride. It's really impressive; you touch a county on the state map and a screen pops up with a list of films made there. "Have any of our state legislators seen this?" I ask. After all, the museum is located right next door to the North Carolina General Assembly. "Because the myth is that film money only goes to Wilmington and Charlotte . . . but this blows that out of the water."

"Well, we don't have any way of tracking if they've been here or not," Hunt replies diplomatically.

"I hope they do come see this. Everyone should see this. What a way to show the real impact that film has here."

"And has for one hundred years. It's still going," Hunt agrees. "We wanted to celebrate it — all of it."

Starring North Carolina! is on display now through September 7. The North Carolina Museum of History is located at 5 East Edenton Street, Raleigh. Information: (919) 807-7900 or ncmuseumofhistory.org.

Starring North Carolina! *highlights films, television shows, and actors from the state. Andy Griffith is best known for his roles in* The Andy Griffith Show *and* Matlock. *The last three seasons of* Matlock *were filmed in Wilmington.*

Muted colors and rustic/chic furnishing for the living room, where North Carolina-made sofa and ottoman take center stage. Among Tracey's favorite features: oversized clock, Danish modern wing chairs and coral accent pillows that pop.

STORY OF A HOUSE

It Takes a Village

In the heart of swanky Mayfaire, home is an opulently designed condo and a table for three

By Ashley Wahl

Photographs by Rick Ricozzi

It was 1983. Inside the campus chapel at Liberty University, two weeks after fall semester started, Tim VanSchaick's friends dared him to sit beside the dark-haired beauty who caught his eye in the school cafeteria.

"I remember everything about that day," recalls Tracey VanSchaick, whose brunette curls gleam as the sun streams in through the living room windows. "I can even remember what he was wearing: Levi corduroys and a plaid flannel shirt. He sat down beside me and the rest is history."

They graduated in May 1986, and married, of course, in June.

Fast forward nearly twenty years and the VanSchaicks are living in Mebane with their three children: Brandon, Brooke and miracle baby Jadon.

"For my older children, I had to take fertility drugs," says Tracey. "We were happy. We had a boy and a girl, five years apart."

But eight years later, Tim had a premonition in the form of a recurring dream that suggested their diaper-changing days weren't over yet.

He asked Tracey to take a pregnancy test.

Surprise, surprise.

Jadon was 2 years old when the VanSchaicks began to renew their love affair with Wilmington, a place they discovered as college sweethearts, by spending weekends at a one-bedroom vacation rental at the Reserve at Mayfaire.

"My husband and I took the bedroom, Brooke and Brandon had blow-up beds in the living room, Jayden slept in the play pen."

They rented for six months. The kids, of course, loved the beach as much as they did.

"I was sad when our lease was up," says Tracey.

In 2006, since Tim's job in medical sales required him to travel to Wilmington once a week, they decided to move to the place that made them happiest.

"There's just enough to do here," says Tracey. "The people are warm and friendly."

For Tim, who lived in upstate New York until college, the pace of a coastal town was just what the doctor ordered. And so they've been here ever since — minus a year in Southern Pines.

Charming town, but it wasn't home.

"Let's move where we really want to be," said Tim. "We really want to be in Wilmington. I know I'll have to travel, but at least I'll be traveling home to a place that I love."

. . . the pace of a coastal town was what the doctor ordered.

Dining room table is paired with upholstered chairs with nailhead trim, a theme throughout. But original abstract painting "makes the room," says Tracey.

French-inspired furniture and floor mirror create an air of romance in the master bedroom, complete with touches of coastal whimsy.

Many people who live in or near our port city claim to have been drawn here by a seemingly magnetic force. Certainly that was true for Tim and Tracey. But Tracey will tell you that her draw here was twofold: first by the sandy shores and soothing waters, then by the open-air shopping center so self-contained that it could very well be its own separate village.

"I love Mayfaire," says Tracey of the swanky commercial and residential area no doubt inspired by the famously opulent shopping district in London's Westminster. "It's the little bubble that I want to stay around."

And so she does — inside an 1,800-square-foot luxury condo at the Village at Mayfaire with Tim, 10-year-old Jadon, and two lap dogs: Yo-Chon puppy, Paris, and Kaia, the sweet-natured Havanese.

The space resembles a designer's showroom. From the foyer, an open floor plan reveals muted colors and rustic/chic furnishings throughout. The dining room table, round with a metal base, is paired with upholstered chairs with nailhead trim and a glass candle lantern centerpiece filled with ocean treasures, including a heart-shaped shell. Nothing cumbersome. Nothing busy. Nothing to interrupt the flow to the cozy living room where mid-century inspired sofa and sleek wing chairs flank a tufted CR Laine ottoman which, with charming wooden serving tray on top, doubles as coffee table. Everything from the sea green coral branch area rug to the decorative throw pillows is exactly what Tracey would have picked out if she had outfitted the rental herself — which is precisely why she asked Julie Bray to do it.

"This is the third place she's done for me," says Tracey of Julie, lead designer of Luxe Home Interiors in Mayfaire Town Center whose knack for design was obvious at a young age.

"I ripped up the carpet in my childhood bedroom when I was 10 years old because I wanted hardwood floors," says Julie.

"We are on the same wavelength," says Tracey.

Unlike their previous projects — an apartment at the Reserve and a custom-built house in Parkside (both at Mayfaire) — Tracey was minimally involved in the design process for the Village condo. In fact, she wasn't even living here. They'd just put their Southern Pines house on the market and, because home is where the beach is, were moving back.

"I have nothing," she told Julie over the phone last August. Two dressers, some framed artwork, a Pottery Barn bedspread, but little else. "You know what I like."

And so, by some design miracle, Julie pulled it all together by Tracey's desired move-in date.

"I had two weeks," says the designer, who is sitting in front of the bay window in what she describes as a modified Danish modern wing chair, the wind stirring a palm tree behind her. "I had to pull from every resource we had," she says, making a sweeping gesture around a room that vaguely resembles a spa lounge. "We don't keep *this* in stock."

HISTOIRE
HISTOIRE

Tracey admits that she, too, has a passion for design.

"I have HGTV on all the time," says Tracey, pointing to the 55-inch flat screen situated on top of a rustic yet elegant wooden media stand.

Among Tracey's favorite shows: *The Property Brothers* and *Fixer Upper,* hosted by design and real estate pros Chip and Joanna Gaines.

"Don't you just love them?" she asks of the made-for-television stars from Waco, Texas.

Julie nods.

"Talk about a sweet relationship."

When Tracey talks about her own relationship, she bubbles over with a sort of schoolgirl giddiness.

"He's still my best friend," says Tracey. "I still can't get enough of him."

In fact, it was Tim who suggested they leave the condo in Julie's hands.

So Julie worked her magic, searching for "pieces with character" to make their three-bedroom rental feel open and inviting, using creams and muted greens and blues to create a sense of calm.

"I came in and had an instant HGTV moment," Tracey recalls. "Basically, it was, 'Bring your clothes. Everything else is done.'"

In the master bedroom, French-inspired furniture and floor mirror spell romantic, as do neutral colors and plush bedding. Vintage-inspired heron and flamingo prints add a touch of coastal whimsy.

Fitting that Jadon's room was designed around the "rustic barn wood" media stand. With Brandon, 24, in graduate school (Texas) and Brooke, 19, at Ringling College of Art and Design (Florida), in many ways, Jadon is like an only child.

"He's a gamer," says Tracey. For his computer desk, Julie chose a masculine table with a zinc top and metal base.

"We wanted to give him furniture he could grow into and keep for a long time," she says.

Brooke, an interior design major, adored the coral prints mounted above the bed in the guest room, where she stayed over winter break.

"I'm going to say that 98 percent of what you see here came from Luxe," says Julie.

For the VanSchaicks, however, this isn't a showroom. This is home. And when they move again, everything here goes with them.

Of course, they're planning to stay at Mayfaire.

From here, they can get to the beach in under ten minutes. Tim can grill burgers at the clubhouse. Jadon can swim in the Olympic-sized pool. And with a village of restaurants to choose from, dinner out is a breeze, even if date nights are few and far between.

"For Valentine's Day, it will be a table for three," laughs Tracey.

Yes, home is at Mayfaire, but this home is where the heart is, too.

Left: Ten-year-old Jadon's room – and world – centers around the rustic wood media stand in his bedroom.

Right: When daughter Brooke comes home to visit, she stays here, in a feminine guest room fit for a future designer.

For the VanSchaicks, however,
this isn't a showroom. This is home.

Camellias

The beloved flowering shrub of North Carolina

By Barbara Sullivan

If Lord Grantham's grandfather had invited a Japanese Samurai warrior to Downton Abbey in, say, 1840, they might have found they had a lot in common — contrary to what the historical stereotypes would suggest. It wouldn't be just that they both shared an exalted social status, a heap of accumulated wealth and an almost religious reverence for tea drinking. (They both certainly would have enjoyed sipping a hot cup of lapsang souchong.) It turns out the Japanese warrior class and the British fox-hunting class of that particular period shared a delight and obsession with the growing of that most beautiful and formally elegant of evergreens, the camellia.

The plant, which in the wild grows to a height of about sixty feet as an understory forest tree, used to be called the Chinese rose. It is a native of both China and Japan although its Latin name, *Camellia japonica*, gives credit to only one country. Whether in its original species form or one of its thousands of cultivars, it's now grown throughout the American South and in many other temperate parts of the world for its showy winter blooms and handsome evergreen form. But until the 1600s no Westerner had ever laid eyes on it. And it wasn't until the late 1700s that the British were finally able to import a viable specimen that didn't immediately up and die. From that point on the Western plant world never looked back. Camellias became more and more popular and continued their reign as "queens of the winter garden" until the turn of the twentieth century.

Cargo ships and tea drinking factor heavily into the story of how the camellia came to grow so happily and abundantly in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, California and many parts of the American South. During the years when the British East India Company carried out its lucrative trade in imports from the Far East, tea was among its most prized cargo. The tea, then as now, was made from the tender new leaves of another kind of camellia native to China, *C. sinensis*. The story goes that the East India Company bribed Chinese officials to obtain a living specimen of *C. sinensis* to bring back to England so that they could grow the plants directly themselves, eliminate the middle man and eventually make a killing. When the plant arrived, however, botanists realized it was the ornamental *C. japonica*, not its cousin, *C. sinensis*. The flowers of *C. japonica* were much bigger and more colorful, but the leaves were not so tasty.

In any case, sometime soon after the first European gardeners set eyes on the first *C. japonica* in full bloom, the craving set in. In the late 1700s, both British and American gardeners were obsessed with reports of newly discovered plants from China and Japan. Novelties arrived regularly on cargo ships; plants were traded among friends; nurseries sprang up to meet the demand for the new imports; the rarer the plant the greater the bragging rights. Gentlemen farmers on both sides of the Atlantic became amateur botanists, keeping detailed records of their prize acquisitions. Camellias were among the most prized of all.

Because camellias were considered exotic and rare, and because of their exorbitant cost, the standard procedure was to protect them from the elements in stove-heated greenhouses or sun-warmed conservatories and to coddle them like babies. Only later did westerners learn that the plants weren't as fragile as they'd imagined and would thrive outdoors with minimum care as long as they were grown in mild-winter climates.

For the next hundred years camellias took pride of place in the collections of wealthy families on both sides of the ocean. The cultivation and study of the plant became a gentleman's hobby; male-only camellia societies sprang up; camellia aficionados named new cultivars after their wives and daughters. By the mid-1800s every European princess or duchess worth her salt had a camellia named after her. At the height of the craze, Alexander Dumas wrote his famous novel, *La Dame aux Camellias*, and a few years later Giuseppe Verdi turned it into the opera *La Traviata*.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the camellia craze in Britain had spread to France and Germany. Prices came down far enough that suburban gardeners with small plots were able to participate in what became an ever-expanding cultivation of new varieties. Professional and amateur breeders introduced hundreds of new cultivars of *C. japonica* and the earlier-blooming relative the sasanqua.

Not to be outdone, the Americans installed a camellia conservatory at the White House. Along with a rose house, orchid houses and other conservatories, it showcased the choicest plants from around the world.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Theodore Roosevelt tore the whole plant complex down so he could build what is now the West Wing. This happened to coincide with the public's waning interest in camellias. It's not clear what lay behind this sudden fall from grace, although we do know that plants, like hemlines and hairdos, fall victim to fashion trends. Possibly the camellia was too much a symbol of the Victorian sensibilities which were being overthrown on a wholesale basis by all things modern. In any case, it wasn't until after World War II that the plant began to grab the imagination of gardeners on anything resembling the scale of the initial camellia mania.

At around this time, in the early 1950s, Bill Howell was working as an Agricultural Extension agent for New Hanover County, helping farmers primarily with tobacco and cotton cultivation. He'd grown up working on his parents' tobacco farm in Wayne County and then gotten a degree in agronomy from N.C. State. While raising a family and working in the Extension office, he found time to develop a hobby that turned into a passion. Like so many others before him, when he fell in love with his first camellia blossom he became hooked. At that time in Wilmington, he says, "it was all azaleas, azaleas, azaleas. I thought the camellias were much prettier flowers."

He met a group of fellow enthusiasts at the Tidewater Camellia Club, an organization founded in 1952 by the noted plantsman Henry Rehder. At that time club membership was only open to men. They met downtown at St. James Episcopal Church to talk about all things camellia. Over time, Bill gained an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the differences that made one bloom stand out from another. The petals might be ruffled at the edges, swirled or fluted. They might overlap in concentric layers completely hiding the stamens (a "formal double") or they might spread out into one cup-like layer (a "single"). Somewhere in between was the "semi-double." Blooms might be peony shaped, anemone shaped or rose shaped. Stamens might be fused at the bottom, standing up almost cylindrically, or they might each be separate and spill out into an exuberant sunburst. If you looked closely enough, you might see that the leaves were covered in a network of fine veins or cut in the shape of fish tails. An almost infinite gradation in shades of pink, red and white could set one variety apart from another in a way only a true connoisseur could appreciate, let alone identify.

Over the years, Bill Howell learned all this and more. He ended up growing over 200 varieties in his backyard, trading cuttings with fellow camellia lovers throughout the South and propagating new plants whenever he got a free moment. He entered camellia shows up and down the East Coast from Norfolk, Virginia, to Jacksonville, Florida. Whenever one of his shrubs set out a "sport," that is a bloom unlike all the other blooms on the shrub, he would remove it and create a new cultivar from it, the ultimate pleasure of the camellia grower. And when his blooms competed in shows, they won prizes.

The process of presenting an award-winning bloom is not a quick one. It starts with the painstaking grafting of a scion onto rootstock, which involves lining up the millimeters-wide cambium layers as precisely as possible, wrapping it all in plastic until the graft "takes" and then growing the new shrub to a flowering size. In the meantime there's watering and fertilizing to be done. In late summer and fall every year, a serious grower will disbud a certain number of growth buds each week and apply gibberellic acid to encourage larger blossoms. Finally, the large, perfectly formed flower is presented on a bed of cotton in a specially prepared box like the treasure it is. This takes a lot of love.

Camellia mania seems to be going through another waning stage at the moment. The kind of devotion Bill Howell and his fellow Carolina camellia buffs lavished on their plants may not be trending, as they say. But the plant will always have a certain magnetism that defies fashion and fads. The plant has been revered, from what we can tell, for thousands of years. One camellia tree growing near a temple in Yunnan province in China has been around for 600 years. People still come to marvel at the hundreds of ruffled crimson blossoms it puts out. A plant like this — and all its thousands of beautifully varied cousins — is a plant which speaks so directly to people's hearts. Surely it will never lose its power of seduction.

ALMANAC

February

By Noah Salt

"Whatever our path, whatever the color or grain of our days, whatever riddles we must solve to stay alive, the secret of life somehow always has to do with the awakening and freeing of what's been asleep."

— Mark Nepo, *The Book of Awakening*

Hearts in Bloom

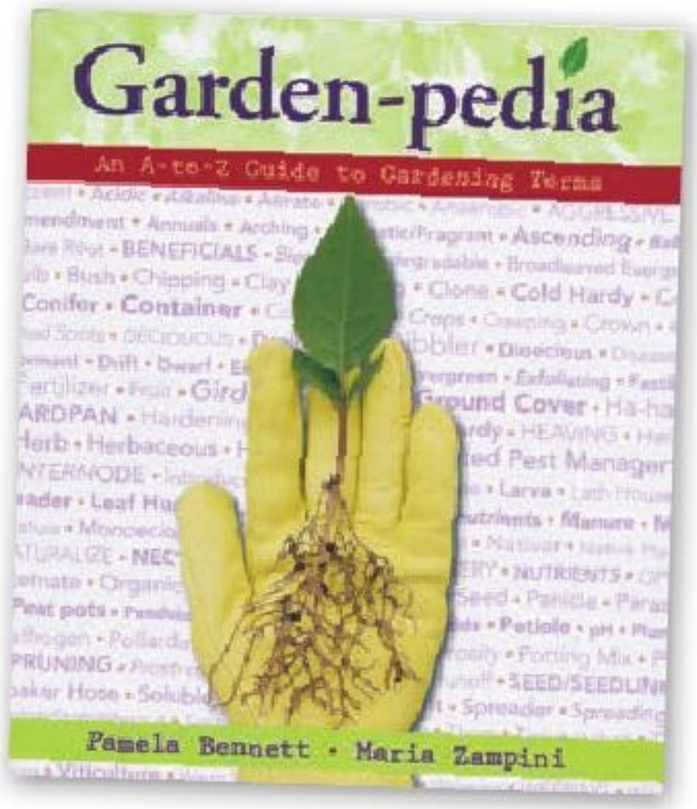
Someone once said that February is the month when we can thankfully abandon impossible New Year's resolutions and get on with the simple business of living. Indeed, as Old Man winter begins to toddle for the exit, much new life is stirring — awakening — all around. Out in the garden, winter daphne is gloriously in bloom with its delicate white flowers and dizzyingly sweet scent. And the oft-transplanted, winter-loving Christmas rose, Helleborus niger, is a beautiful harbinger of things to come. Snowdrops are visible and the deep red berries of mature nandina, so-called the "Bamboo of Heaven," are at their peak of color on the gloomiest gray day, nature's contribution to the red roses and candy hearts of Valentine's Day and red-letter Presidential birthdays.

According to the Greeting Card Association, 145 million Valentine cards will be sent worldwide this year, which does not include the very cutest ones, those exchanged in schools. Growing ever more rapidly, of course, is the number of digital e-cards. Cnn.com's estimate that $1.6 billion will be spent on candy and $1.9 billion on flowers seems impressive until you consider the $4.4 billion people spend on diamonds, gold and silver.

All this giving and getting stems from a blend of numerous traditions of courtly love that gained popularity, much of it from the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer during Britain's high Middle Ages. Celebrating the end of winter — by feasting and a formal display of romantic inclinations — is married to broader pagan traditions hidden from view "bye wintere's cloack," as one ancient source metaphorically puts it. The idea, of course, is that winter's death leads us to new life come spring.

The official observance of Valentine's Day on February 14 stems from the ecclesiastical legend of a Roman saint named Valentine who was jailed, tortured and executed on this date around 270 A.D. during the reign of Claudius II (a.k.a. "Claudius the Cruel") for conducting marriages in secret during a period of turmoil on the empire's borders. At one point, Roman authorities actually banned engagements and marriages out of fear that attachments to wives and families would keep citizens from serving in the army. Hence a tradition was born — that of messages of love and fidelity sent in secret, sometimes unsigned, pledges of hidden love.

New on the Shelf: "Hort Speak" Made Plain



For newcomers and even old gardening hands alike, the terminology of the garden can sometimes be a source of frustration and confusion. For some of us, the Latin names are a pure impossibility, thus keeping things simple and relying on the common names of plants is a must. Hence our delight at receiving a nifty little book called *Garden-pedia* in the New Year mail. This handy "A to Z Guide to Gardening Terms" by horticulturists Pamela Bennett and Maria Zampini, lays out more than 300 simple, beautifully illustrated definitions literally on everything from "Abiotic" (it simply means a "nonliving organism") to helpful illustrated "Zone Hardiness" maps. Every term from the familiar "Flower" to the obscure "Volcano mulching" is presented in this clear and entertaining resources guide that even includes suggested books, websites, plant organizations and useful databases, ideal for garden newcomers and veterans alike on the cusp of a new growing season. Dare we suggest even the perfect gift for your garden-mad valentine? St. Lynn's Press, Pittsburgh, $16.95.

February Garden To-Do List

Begin your spring garden with a good clean-up of all garden beds.

Early February is the last best opportunity to prune shrubs and trees including crepe myrtles and camellias.

This is the time to enrich your soil by digging in composted manure and garden waste and turning under cover crops, such as annual rye, vetch and clover.

Now's also the time to plant (and transplant) perennials, bare root roses, shrubs, vines and trees.

Indoors, this is when you should start those summer veggies under light.

Outside, you may direct-seed cabbage family veggies, carrots, spinach, onions, peas and late collards.

Also, think about planting dahlia and begonia tubers.

February 2015

Arts Calendar

The Tempest by Aquila Theatre

2/3

NC Jazz Festival

2/5-7

Natalie Douglas in Concert

2/11

Tidewater Camelia Club Show & Sale

2/28

2/3 Nature Program

9 a.m. – 4 p.m. Identify shore birds, waterfowl and other winter birds while exploring habitats in Carolina Beach, Fort Fisher and Wilmington. Pre-registration required. Admission: $10. Halyburton Park, 4099 South Seventeenth Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 341-0075 or www.halyburtonpark.com.

2/3 Live Theater

7 p.m. Aquila Theatre presents a dynamic approach to Shakespeare's famous drama, The Tempest. Admission: $5–30. Kenan Auditorium, UNCW, 515 Wagoner Drive, Wilmington. Info: (910) 962-3500 or www.uncw.edu/presents.

2/5 Child Yoga

3:30 p.m. Child yoga offered on the first Thursday of every month. This month's theme: "Omazing Love". Admission: $9. Children's Museum of Wilmington, 116 Orange Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 254-3534 or www.playwilmington.org.

2/5 Nature Workshop

6–9 p.m. Jeff Haul, Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Biologist with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commissions, will teach participants frog and toad identification, ecology, why and how we monitor amphibians, and the field ID of frog calls. Free. Halyburton Park, 4099 South Seventeenth Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 341-0075 or www.halyburtonpark.com.

2/5–7 NC Jazz Festival

7:30–10:30 p.m. (Thursday); 7:30 p.m. – 12 a.m. (Friday) 10:30 a.m. – 2 p.m. & 7:30 p.m. – 12 a.m. (Saturday). Largest traditional jazz festival in the southeast. Thursday's lineup includes the Benny Hill Quartet, Molly Ryan and Ed Polcer. On Friday and Saturday, thirteen All-Star musicians deliver traditional sets, each with a different leader. And on Saturday morning, patrons are treated to a musical brunch with All-Star musicians followed by a chance to jam along with them. Admission: $40–60. Hilton Wilmington Riverside, 301 Water Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 793-1111 or www.ncjazzfestival.com.

2/5–8 Musical Theater

8 p.m. Cape Fear Theatre Arts presents Triassic Parq: The Musical directed by Rachael Moser. Musical comedy inspired by Jurassic Park, but told through the eyes of dinosaurs. Admission: $18–25. City Stage, 21 North Front Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 342-0272 or www.citystageco.com.

2/5–8 Live Theater

8 p.m. (Thursday – Saturday); 3 p.m. (Sunday). Big Dawg Productions presents Dearly Beloved. Comic drama examines the gossip engendered when Frankie Futrelle plans an elaborate ante-bellum-inspired wedding in Frayo, Texas for her daughter, Tina Jo. Admission: $15–20. Cape Fear Playhouse, 613 Castle Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 367-5237 or www.bigdawgproductions.org.

2/5–15 Musical Theater

7:30 p.m. (Thursday – Saturday); 3 p.m. (Sunday). Ring of Fire. Tribute to Johnny Cash includes fourteen performers and thirty-eight legendary songs. Admission: $15–30. Thalian Hall, 310 Chestnut Street, Wilmington. Info: (800) 523-2820 or www.thalianhall.org.

2/6 Feast Down East Conference

8 a.m. – 4 p.m. Annual regional event features more than twenty workshops for those who support a thriving food system; includes breakfast, lunch, a keynote address by Jennifer MacDougall of the Blue Cross Blue Shield of NC Foundation, and topics such as solar energy, sustainable practices, certification, and the buying and selling relationship. Admission: $15–30. UNCW Burney Center, 601 South College Road, Wilmington. Info: www.feastdowneast.org/conference.html.

2/6 Nonprofit Workshop

8–11 a.m. The Leading Together Workshop helps teams create plans for leading nonprofit organizations. Workshop discusses different communication preferences and personality traits, and helps the team create a successful communication plan between the board chair, executive director, staff and board of directors. Admission: $15. UNCW, 601 South College Road, Wilmington. Info: (910) 962-3844.

2/6 Red Dress Luncheon

11 a.m. – 1 p.m. Annual fundraiser includes heart-healthy lunch, fashion show, vendor exhibit (jewelry, clothing and house wares), plus local celebrity Fanny Slater as guest speaker. Admission: $50. Proceeds benefit the Marlene Sigler Cardiac Endowment and women's heart health education. Wilmington Convention Center, 515 Nutt Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 251-5101 or www.nhrmc.org/reddress.

2/6 Organ Recital

7 p.m. Organ recital featuring Andrew Scanlon, Professor of Organ at East Carolina University. Free. St. Paul's Episcopal Church, 16 North Sixteenth Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 762-4578 or www.spechurch.com.

2/6 Commemorative Concert

7:30 p.m. Celebrating the Dream Commemorative Concert features critically acclaimed tenors Victor Trent Cook, Rodrick Dixon and Thomas Young. Embark upon a memorable musical journey through the worlds of opera, Broadway, jazz, blues, soul spiritual, gospel and spoken word. Odell Williamson Auditorium, Brunswick Community College, 50 College Road NW, Bolivia. Info: (910) 383-1724 or www.bccowa.com.

2/6 & 7 Dinner Theater

7 p.m. TheatreNOW presents Love Happens, a romantic comedy by Richard Orlaff that follows a year in the lives of two couples, one young, the other approaching their 50th wedding anniversary. Admission: $24–42. TheatreNOW, 19 South Tenth Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 399-3669 or www.theatrewilmington.com.

2/7 Red Dress 5K

8:30 a.m. Run or walk the riverfront in your flashiest red dress or tutu to support women's heart health. Admission: $20–40. Proceeds benefit the Red Dress Project and the Marlene Sigler Cardiac Endowment. Wilmington Convention Center, 10 Convention Center Drive, Wilmington. Info: its-go-time.com/red-dress-run-5k-and-walk-2015.

2/7 Volunteer Fair

10 a.m. – 2 p.m. The Conscience Fair is a chance to learn about volunteer opportunities in the Cape Fear region. Free. Union Station, Cape Fear Community College, 502 North Front Street, Wilmington. Info: www.conscienceonline.com.

2/7 BachFest

8 p.m. The Wilmington Symphony provides a generous offering of Johann Sebastian Bach's orchestral works and choral music as well as later reinterpretations. Featured soloists include Nancy King, Constance Paolantonio, Bob Workmon, Carl Samet and James Yates. Admission: $6/students; $25–27/adults. Kenan Auditorium, UNCW, 601 South College Road, Wilmington. Info: (910) 791-9262 or www.wilmingtonsymphony.org/bachfest.

2/7 & 8 Living History Weekend

9 a.m. – 5 p.m. Cameron Art Museum's Civil War Living History Weekend commemorates the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Forks Road with re-enactors depicting Confederate, Union and U.S. Colored troops, plus period music, art activities and more. Free. Cameron Art Museum, 3201 South Seventeenth Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 395-5999 or battleofforksroad.org.

2/8 Lecture & Tea

3 p.m. Dr. Kemille Moore of UNCW will lead a presentation on Anna McNeil Whistler, mother of James McNeil Whistler (artist of the famous "Whistler's Mother") followed by an English afternoon tea with traditional Victorian treats. Admission: $25. Proceeds help fund future educational programs and support upkeep of the Latimer House. Latimer House, 126 South Third Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 762-0492 or hslcf.org.

2/8–15 Valentine Carriage Ride

Treat your sweetheart to a red rose, chocolates and a romantic carriage ride through downtown Wilmington. By private reservation only. Water Street & Market Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 251-8889 or www.horsedrawntours.com.

2/9 & 10 Youth Nature Program

10–11 a.m. Kids ages 2–5 discover nature through stories, songs, hands-on activities, hikes and crafts. This week's theme: "Nature's Valentines". Admission: $3. Halyburton Park, 4099 South Seventeenth Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 341-0075 or www.halyburtonpark.com.

2/10, 12 & 17 Adult Tutor Training

6–9 p.m. Nine hours of training to become a certified Adult Literacy Tutor. Admission: $20–50. Cape Fear Literacy Council, 1012 South Seventeenth Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 251-0911 or www.cfliteracy.org.

2/11 Natalie Douglas in Concert

7:30 p.m. Jazz singer Natalie Douglas brings her one-woman tribute to Nina Simone here to Wilmington. Douglas is a seven-time Manhattan Association of Cabarets and Clubs award winner who has performed at Birdland Jazz Club, Carnegie Hall, Jazz at Lincoln Center and the Kennedy Center. Admission: $18–32. Thalian Hall, 310 Chestnut Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 632-2285 or www.thalianhall.org.

2/11 Sketch Comedy

8 p.m. Pineapple-Shaped Lamps present an evening of sketch comedy. Admission: $5. TheatreNOW, 19 South Tenth Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 399-3NOW or www.theatrewilmington.com.

2/12 National Theater

2 p.m. *Of Mice and Men*, the smash Broadway show filmed by National Theatre Live stars James Franco and Chris O'Dowd. Admission: $18–20. Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, 620 South College Road, Wilmington. Info: (910) 962-3195 or www.uncw.edu/olli.

2/12 Jazz at the CAM

6:30–8 p.m. Live music by Gregg Gelb Jazz Quartet and vocalist Kathy Montgomery Gelb. Admission: $5–12. Cameron Art Museum, 3201 South Seventeenth Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 395-5999 or www.cameronartmuseum.org.

2/12 Live Music

7 p.m. The Heritage of America Band performs patriotic and classical selections from the United States Air Force Outreach Performance Program. Free. Carolina Civic Center, 315 North Chestnut Street, Lumberton. Info: (910) 738-4339 or www.carolinaciviccenter.com.

2/12 & 15 Monologue

1–5 p.m. The UNCW Women's Studies & Resource Center and the Women's Studies Student Association works with Wilmington's Carousel Center for Abused Children and Coastal Horizon's Rape Crisis Center to stage two benefit productions of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*. Proceeds will benefit the Coastal Horizons Center, the Carousel Center and UNCW's V-Day Campaign. UNCW Lumina Theater, Fisher Student Center, 651 South College Road, Wilmington. Info: www.uncw.edu/wsrc.

2/13 CD Release Party

5 p.m. Release party for Jerry Powell's second solo album, *One Song at a Time*. Think acoustic and slide guitar with lots of vocal harmony. Sweet 'n Savory Café, 1611 Pavilion Drive, Wilmington. Info: jerrypowellmusic.com.

2/13 Cupid's Cocktail Cruise

5:30 p.m. Romantic evening cruise complete with beautiful views of the riverfront, hors d'oeuvres, live music and champagne. Admission: $25. Wilmington Water Tours, 212 South Water Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 338-3134 or www.wilmingtonwatertours.net.

2/13 Pizza Putt

6:30–9 p.m. Beer, pizza and putt-putt at the Children's Museum for a night of "cheesy" fun. Admission: $20–30. Children's Museum of Wilmington, 116 Orange Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 254-3534 or www.playwilmington.org.

2/13 & 14 Valentine's Day Lock-In

6 p.m. – 9 a.m. Valentine's sleepover at the aquarium for ages 5–12. Children will play games, make crafts and enjoy animal programs; dinner, snacks and breakfast included. NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher, 900 Loggerhead Road, Kure Beach. Info: (910) 458-8257 or www.ncaquariums.com/fort-fisher.

2/13–15 Musical Theater

8 p.m. Cape Fear Theatre Arts presents *Triassic Parq: The Musical* directed by Rachael Moser. Musical comedy inspired by *Jurassic Park* but told through the eyes of dinosaurs. Admission: $18–25. City Stage, 21 North Front Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 342-0272 or www.citystageco.com.

2/13–15 Ghost Walk & Pub Crawl

Escape the same old Valentine's Day date with a Ghost Walk of Old Wilmington or a Haunted Pub Crawl. Both tours include true stories of Wilmington and love gone wrong. Call for schedule. Admission: $11–13 (ghost walk); $17.50 (pub crawl). 1 Market Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 794-1866 or www.hollywoodnc.com/valentine_tour.html.

2/14 Family Nature Program

9:30–10:30 a.m. "Animal Sweethearts" gives participants a chance to observe the many antics that critters engage in to attract each other. Admission: $1. Halyburton Park, 4099 South Seventeenth Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 341-0075 or www.halyburtonpark.com.

2/14 Family Science Saturday

10 a.m., 11 a.m. & 12 p.m. The Wonders of Light. Participants will learn why the sky is blue, what makes a rainbow, how light travels, and will conduct mirror experiments. Parental participation required. Admission: $5–8. Cape Fear Museum, 814 Market Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 798-4362 or www.capefearmuseum.com.

2/14 Metropolitan Opera

12:30 p.m. Double bill features Tchaikovsky's *Iolanta* and Bartok's *Bluebeard's Castle*. Anna Netrebko stars as the beautiful blind girl who experiences love for the first time in the former, while Nadja Micheal is the unwitting victim of the diabolical Bluebeard. Admission: $20–24. Lumina Theater, UNCW, 601 South College Road, Wilmington. Info: (910) 962-3195 or www.uncw.edu/olli.

2/14 Youth Nature Program

1:30–3 p.m. Valentines in the Woods. Children ages 6–11 will trek through the woods in search of nature's lovebirds and learn how changes in seasons bring about changes in animal behavior. Admission: $3. Halyburton Park, 4099 South Seventeenth Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 341-0075 or www.halyburtonpark.com.

2/14 Valentine's Day Cruise

6–9 p.m. Treat your sweetheart to a romantic dinner and dance cruise. Includes buffet, cash bar and live entertainment aboard North Carolina's largest riverboat. Admission: $56/person. Cape Fear Riverboats, 101 South Water Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 343-1611 or www.cfrboats.com.

2/14 Cape Fear Heart Ball

6–11:45 p.m. Annual black tie fundraiser for the American Heart Association featuring a silent auction and cocktail reception followed by dinner, music, dancing and a live auction. Admission: $150. Proceeds benefit the American Heart Association. Union Station, Cape Fear Community College, 5th floor, 502 North Front Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 538-9270 or wilmingtonncheartball.ahaevents.org.

2/14 Live Jazz

7 p.m. Irvin Mayfield and the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra. Admission: $5–35. Kenan Auditorium, UNCW, 515 Wagoner Drive, Wilmington. Info: (910) 962-3500 or uncw.edu/presents.

2/14 Live Music

9 p.m. An evening of garage rock with The Lonely Teardrops. Free. Satellite Bar & Lounge, 120 Greenfield Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 399-2796 or satellitebarandlounge.com.

2/14 & 15 Ft. Anderson Anniversary

10 a.m. – 8 p.m. (Saturday); 10 a.m. – 4 p.m. (Sunday). Two days of historic entertainment commemorating the 150th Anniversary of the fall of Fort Anderson. Includes Civil War living history actors and a candle-lit tour of the fort. Free. Fort Anderson State Historic Site, 8884 St. Philips Road Southeast, Winnabow. Info: (910) 371-6613 or www.ncbrunswick.com.

2/14 & 15 Valentine's Day Cruise

11 a.m. – 4 p.m. A romantic cruise around Wrightsville Beach Harbor and Masonboro Island. Includes select beverages, chocolate and goodie bag. Admission: $25. Banks Channel, 275 Waynick Boulevard, Wilmington. Info: (910) 200-4022 or www.wrightsvillebeachscenictours.com.

2/14–20 iWeek

UNCW's 22nd Annual Intercultural Week includes films, performances, panel discussions and lectures. Events include an intercultural festival, *The Vagina Monologues*, film screenings and discussions on Multicultural Russia and Black Coffee: Exploring African American Romantic Relationships, a faculty research symposium, Lunar New Year celebration and more. UNCW, 601 South College Road, Wilmington. Info: (910) 962-3685 or www.uncw.edu/international.

2/15 Monty's Home Pet Expo

11 a.m. – 4 p.m. Featuring more than seventy pet-related vendors, rescue booths, silent auction, and a kid's corner filled with games, prizes and interactive learning about pet care. Admission: $5. Proceeds support Monty's Home canine rescue/prison training programs as well as education and grief support. Coastline Convention Center, 533 Nutt Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 259-7911 or www.montyshome.org/expo.

2/18 Snake & Turtle Feeding

4 p.m. Brief presentation followed by feeding. Admission: $1. Halyburton Park, 4099 South Seventeenth Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 341-0075 or www.halyburtonpark.com.

2/19 Awards Luncheon

12–2 p.m. The Lower Cape Fear Stewardship Development Awards Luncheon recognizes extraordinary development that protects, conserves and provides awareness of natural resources in the region. Admission: $35. The Terraces at Sir Tyler, 1826 Sir Tyler Drive, Wilmington. Info: (910) 253-2832 or www.stewardshipdev.org.

2/19–22 Live Theater

8 p.m.; 2 p.m. (Sunday). UNCW Theatre presents *Hamlet*. Admission: $5–12. UNCW Cultural Arts Building, 5270 Randall Drive, Wilmington. Info: (910) 962-3500 or uncw.edu/theatre.

2/19–28 Live Theater

7:30 p.m.; 3 p.m. (Sunday). Thalian Association presents the Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning drama *Clybourne Park*. Based on *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, the play features two stunning acts set fifty years apart. Act I portrays community leaders in 1959 anxiously trying to stop the sale of a home to an African-American family. Cut to present day in Act II, and the same home is situated in a predominately African-American neighborhood battling to hold its ground in the face of gentrification. Admission: $10–25. Red Barn Studio Theatre, 1122 South Third Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 254-1788 or www.thalian.org/redbarn.

2/20 & 21 Art for All 5

3–9 p.m. (Friday); 11 a.m. – 7 p.m. (Saturday). Art sale featuring more than fifty local and regional artists and crafters. Food trucks, cash bar and coffee shop available. Ticket is good for both days and includes a raffle ticket. Admission: $5. Brooklyn Arts Center, 516 North Fourth Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 538-2939 or www.brooklynartsnc.com.

2/20–22 Seaglass Salvage Market

9 a.m. – 5 p.m. (Friday & Saturday); 12–5 p.m. (Sunday). Up-cycled, recycled and repurposed furniture and home décor for sale on the third weekend of each month. Seaglass Salvage Market, 1987 Andrew Jackson Highway, Leland. Info: www.seaglasssalvagemarket.com.

2/20–22 Spring Home Show

11 a.m. – 8 p.m. (Friday); 10 a.m. – 8 p.m. (Saturday); 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. (Sunday). Annual home show for homeowners in all stages of remodeling, landscaping and decorating. View hundreds of exhibits, product demos, interior and exterior vignettes, plus advice and inspiration from the pros. Free. Wilmington Convention Center, 515 Nutt Street, Wilmington. Info: (855) 523-5310 or www.wilmingtonhomeshow.com.

2/20–22 Children's Theater

7 p.m. (Thursday – Saturday); 3 p.m. (Sunday). Thalian Association presents *School House Rock Live* based on the Emmy-Award-winning educational cartoon series from the 1970s and 80s. Admission: $12. Hannah Block Community Arts Center, 120 South Second Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 341-7860 or www.thalian.org.

2/20–22 Musical Theater

8 p.m.; 3 p.m. (Sunday) Cape Fear Theatre Arts presents *Triassic Parq: The Musical* directed by Rachael Moser. Musical comedy inspired by *Jurassic Park*, but told through the eyes of dinosaurs. Admission: $18–25. City Stage, 21 North Front Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 342-0272 or www.citystageco.com.

2/21 Battleship Program

9 a.m. – 5 p.m. "Battleship Firepower" program for ages sixteen and older; boxed lunch provided. Admission: $85–95. Battleship NC, 1 Battleship Road, Wilmington. Info: (910) 251-5797 or www.battleshipnc.com.

2/21 Family Nature Program

9:30–10:30 a.m. Enjoy a cup of java while observing the bird feeding area from indoors. Afterward, take a short walk to observe birds at the pond. Admission: $3. Halyburton Park, 4099 South Seventeenth Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 341-0075 or www.halyburtonpark.com.

2/21 Family Concert

11 a.m. – 12 p.m. A family concert with a local favorite: Morning Music with Mr. Mark. Arrive early and make jingle bell sticks with Mary Ellen before the show. Admission: $9. Children's Museum of Wilmington, 116 Orange Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 254-3534 or www.play-wilmington.org.

2/21 Polar Plunge

1:30 p.m. Annual 5K winds through Kure Beach and ends with a dive in the Atlantic Ocean. Includes pre-race auction. Runners are encouraged to wear costumes. Admission: $20–65. Proceeds benefit the Special Olympics of New Hanover County. Carolina Beach Boardwalk, 100 Cape Fear Boulevard, Carolina Beach. Info: its-go-time.com/polar-plunge-5k-2015.

2/21 & 22 Moore's Creek Anniversary

10 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. Commemorate the 239th anniversary of the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge. Living historians will be on the battlefield demonstrating the day-to-day life of the colonists. Includes candle making, blacksmithing, historic foodways, colonial encampments and firing demonstrations. Free. Moores Creek National Battlefield, 40 Patriots Hall Drive, Currie. Info: (910) 283-5591.

2/21 Boat Safety Class

8 a.m. – 4:40 p.m. (2/21) The Cape Fear Sail & Power Squadron offers a comprehensive introductory boating course which satisfies the N.C. safe boating education requirement for anyone less than 26 years of age. Admission: $70. Cape Fear Community College, 411 North Front Street, Wilmington. Info: www.capefearboatingcourse.org.

2/22 Road Race

7 a.m. Inaugural 5K, 10K and half marathon which begins and ends at Lumina Station and takes runners through the Cross City Trail and UNCW campus. Admission: $25–85. Proceeds benefit the Miracle League of Wilmington. Lumina Station, 1900 Eastwood Road, Wilmington. Info: (866) 561-5651 or race131.com.

2/22 Admissions Open House

3–5 p.m. The Friends School of Wilmington hosts an Admissions Open House at its Peiffer and Pine Grove campuses. Meet faculty, tour the campus, visit classrooms, and speak with current parents and students. Friends School of Wilmington, 207 Pine Grove Drive, Wilmington & 350 Peiffer Avenue, Wilmington. Info: (910) 791-8221 or www.fsow.org.

2/22 Wind Ensemble Concert

7:30 p.m. Chamber Music Wilmington presents Zéphyros Wind Ensemble. Admission: $30/adult; $12/student. Church of the Servant, 4925 Oriole Drive, Wilmington. Info: (910) 343-1079 or www.chambermusicwilmington.org.

2/23 Gardening Class

6–8 p.m. Back-to-basics gardening class will cover topics ranging from plant nutrition to woody ornamentals and more. NHC Arboretum Auditorium, 6206 Oleander Drive, Wilmington. Info: (910) 798-7660 or arboretum.nhcgov.com/gardens-programs/classes-workshops.

2/23 NC Symphony Concert

7:30 p.m. The NC Symphony Orchestra performs Beethoven's 7th with Grant Llewellyn conducting. Pre-concert talk with William Robin, the NC Symphony Scholar-in-residence, will be held at 6:20 p.m. Admission: $30–70. Kenan Auditorium, UNCW, 515 Wagoner Drive, Wilmington. Info: (910) 962-3500 or www.ncsymphony.org.

2/23 & 24 Youth Nature Program

10–11 a.m. Kids ages 2–5 discover nature through stories, songs, hands-on activities, hikes and crafts. This week's theme: "Animal Moves and Sounds." Admission: $3. Halyburton Park, 4099 South Seventeenth Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 341-0075 or www.halyburtonpark.com.

2/25 Photo Exhibit Opens

9 a.m. *Nagasaki to Normandy: Seven Global Decades of Images of War and Peace, Peoples and Cultures* by globe-trotting Wilmington native, author and military historian, Wilbur D. Jones. On view through 3/26. Admission: Free. Hannah Block Community Arts Center, 120 South Second Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 341-7860.

2/25 Live Theater

8 p.m. (Wednesday – Saturday); 3 p.m. (Sunday). Opera House Theatre Company presents the Stephen Sondheim classic *Sweeney Todd*. The macabre musical thriller is set in the gritty streets of 19th century London, and paints a penetrating portrait of a man driven to madness by injustice. Admission: $31. Thalian Hall, 310 Chestnut Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 632-2285 or www.thalianhall.org.

2/25 Live Music

8 p.m. Six-time Grammy Award-winning legends of Irish music, Paddy Moloney & The Chieftains storm the stage. Admission: $45–65. Kenan Auditorium, UNCW, 515 Wagoner Drive, Wilmington. Info: (910) 962-3500 or www.uncw.edu/arts/chieftains.html.

2/25–28 Live Theater

8 p.m. (Monday – Saturday); 3 p.m. (Sunday). Opera House Theatre Company presents *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, based on an adaptation by Christopher Bond. Book by Hugh Wheeler; music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Admission: $29. Thalian Hall, 310 Chestnut Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 632-2285 or www.operahousetheatrecompany.net.

2/26 Play at the Beach

11 a.m. – 3 p.m. Try your hand at Bridge, Canasta, Pinochle and other card games, or bring along a game of your choice. Unique baskets will be raffled; playing cards and lunch provided. Admission: $30. Proceeds benefit the Assistance League of Greater Wilmington. Shell Island Resort, 2700 North Lumina Avenue. Info: (910) 686-3902 or www.algw.assistanceleague.org.

2/26 Book Talk

3 p.m. The Lower Cape Fear Historical Society presents author Tony Rivenbark with his new book, *Thalian Hall*. Optional lunch in the Tea Room at noon. Admission: $5/talk; $15/lunch. Latimer House, 126 South Third Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 762-0492 or hslcf.org.

1/27 Gallery Walk

6–9 p.m. The Arts Council of Wilmington brings self-guided tours of galleries, art spaces and studios to Downtown Wilmington. Free. Info: (910) 343-0998 or www.artscouncilofwilmington.org.

2/27 Closing Reception

6–9 p.m. Closing reception for *Brownie Harris: A 45 Year Retrospective*, a solo exhibition that explores the extensive career of nationally known Wilmington-based photographer Brownie Harris. Includes portraits, bromoils, dance and industrial work. Wilma W. Daniels Gallery, CFCC, 200 Hanover Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 362-7000 or cfcc.edu/blogs/wilmagallery.

2/27 & 28 Civil War Symposium

1 p.m. (Friday); 7:45 a.m. (Saturday). What a Cruel Thing is War – Sacrifices and Legacies of the Civil War. UNCW Civil War Symposium commemorating the Civil War Sesquicentennial. Includes opening reception, lectures and talks with Civil War historian and author William C. "Jack" Davis and former naval officer Dr. Craig Symonds. Concludes with a night firing of the 32-pound seacoast artillery cannon. Admission: $10–25. Southport Maritime Museum, 204 East Moore Street, Southport (Friday); UNCW, Morton Hall, 601 South College Road, Wilmington & Fort Fisher State Historic Site, 1610 South Fort Fisher Boulevard, Kure Beach (Saturday). Info: (919) 807-7333 or www.ncdcr.gov/civilwarsymposium.

2/27–3/1 Children's Theater

7 p.m.; 3 p.m. (Sunday). Thalian Association presents *School House Rock Live* based on the Emmy-Award-winning educational cartoon series from the 1970s and 80s. Admission: $12. Hannah Block Community Arts Center, 120 South Second Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 341-7860 or www.thalian.org.

2/28 Camellia Club Show & Sale

9 a.m. (Sale); 1–5 p.m. (Show). Winter show and sale featuring prize-winning blooms grown by Tidewater Camellia Club members and local residents, plus educational and floral displays. More than 1,000 blooms will be displayed for evaluation by American Camellia Society judges. Children's art display will be presented by local elementary schools. Free. New Hanover County Arboretum, 6206 Oleander Drive, Wilmington. Info: (910) 509-1792 or www.tidewatercamelliaclub.org.

2/28 Boat Safety Class

9 a.m. – 1 p.m. Learn the challenges and complexities of boating on the Cape Fear Waterways and take a two-and-a-half-hour training cruise for firsthand experience. Admission: $70. Cape Fear Community College, 411 North Front Street, Wilmington. Info: www.capefearboatingcourse.org.

2/28 Family Nature Program

9:30–10:30 a.m. Trek through a longleaf pine forest and learn about its ecosystem. Admission: $3. Halyburton Park, 4099 South Seventeenth Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 341-0075 or www.halyburtonpark.com.

2/28 Bridal Show

1–4 p.m. Romeo & Juliet's Next Fake Wedding. Newly engaged couples are invited to experience a hands-on bridal show alternative with hand-selected wedding professionals. Meet some of Wilmington's top vendors while getting inspiration for the big day. The bridal party will be dressed in Romeo & Juliet- inspired attire with modern-day elements supplied by a Port City bridal shop. Admission: $15. The River Room, 18 South Water Street, Suite 2, Wilmington. Info: (910) 251-8902 or www.thenextfakewedding.eventbrite.com.

2/28 Wine & Beer Walk

1–6 p.m. Self-guided tasting tour of downtown Wilmington's finest restaurants and drinking

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establishments. Check in at the wine walk headquarters at 208 Market Street where you will receive your official ID and a map of participating establishments. Admission: $15; $25/pair. Info: www.wineandbeerwalk.com.

2/28 Light Up the Night

6–11 p.m. Fundraiser in honor of local loved ones who are battling cancer. The evening includes local bands, DJ, food, drink specials, raffles, auctions and more. Puzzle lights may be purchased to display in honor of friends and family. Admission: $25–30. Proceeds benefit Love is Bald and Pretty in Pink. Coastline Convention Center, 503 Nutt Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 688-3433 or www.facebook.com/lightupthenightp3planning.

WEEKLY HAPPENINGS

Monday – Wednesday Cinematique Films

7 p.m. Independent, classic and foreign films at historic Thalian Hall. Check online for updated listings and special screenings. Admission: $7. Thalian Hall, 310 Chestnut Street, Wilmington. Info/Tickets: (910) 632-2285 or www.thalianhall.org.

Tuesday Preschool Story Time

3 p.m. Children are introduced to literacy with basic skills, music and movement. Admission: $9. Children's Museum of Wilmington, 116 Orange Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 254-3534 or www.playwilmington.org.

Tuesday Kids Cooking Club

3:30 p.m. Explore seasonal recipes and savor the flavor of your work. Admission: $9. Children's Museum of Wilmington, 116 Orange Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 254-3534 or www.playwilmington.org.

Tuesday Cape Fear Blues Jam

8 p.m. A unique gathering of the area's finest Blues musicians. Bring your instrument and join the fun. No cover charge. The Rusty Nail, 1310 South Fifth Avenue. Info: (910) 251-1888 or www.capefearblues.org.

Tuesday Wine Tasting

6–8 p.m. Free wine tasting hosted by wine professionals plus wine and small plate specials all night. Admission: Free. The Fortunate Glass, 29 South Front Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 399-4292 or www.fortunateglasswinebar.com.

Wednesday S.T.E.M. Explorations

10 a.m. & 3:30 p.m. Have a blast conducting experiments, which combine activities in science, technology, engineering and math. Admission: $9. Children's Museum of Wilmington, 116 Orange Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 254-3534 or www.playwilmington.org.

Wednesday T'ai Chi at CAM

12–1 p.m. Qigong (Practicing the Breath of Life) with Martha Gregory. Open to beginner and experienced participants. Members: $5. Non-members: $8. Cameron Art Museum, 3201 South Seventeenth Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 395-5999 or www.cameronartmuseum.org.

Wednesday Guided Meditation

6:15–7:15 p.m. Energy clearing meditation led by Energy Healer Jennifer Chapis. Suggested exchange: $15. McKay Healing Arts, 4916 Wrightsville Avenue, Wilmington. Info: www.alllovehealing.com.

Thursday StoryCOOKS

10 a.m. Cooking club for preschoolers lets children make dishes inspired by a different story each week. Admission: $9. Children's Museum of Wilmington, 116 Orange Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 254-3534 or www.playwilmington.org.

Thursday Yoga at the CAM

12–1 p.m. Open to all levels. Members: $5. Non-members: $8. Cameron Art Museum, 3201 South Seventeenth Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 395-5999 or www.cameronartmuseum.org.

Thursday Jump! Start! Learn!

3:30 p.m. Jump-start a healthier life and learn about the human body through fun games and exercises. Admission: $9. Children's Museum of Wilmington, 116 Orange Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 254-3534 or www.playwilmington.org.

Thursday SOAR Kids' Club

4:30–5:30 p.m. Kids' club with a focus on teaching virtues such as kindness, patience, integrity, character, strength and gratitude. The club also aims to introduce kids to altruism by volunteering for different events within the community such as the beach sweep, feeding the homeless, participating in angel tree and singing to elderly residents. For 2nd to 5th grade students. Chick-fil-A, Mayfaire Town Center, 6891 Swan Mill Road, Wilmington. Info: (910) 352-7469 or kidsofvirtue.wix.com/kidsofvirtue.

Friday Toddler Time

10 a.m. Little ones express their creativity while learning fine and gross motor skills. Admission: $9. Children's Museum of Wilmington, 116 Orange Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 254-3534 or www.playwilmington.org.

Friday Adventures in the Arts

3:30 p.m. Children explore the arts through various mediums with a new project every week. Admission: $9. Children's Museum of Wilmington, 116 Orange Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 254-3534 or www.playwilmington.org.

Friday River Club

6:30 p.m. Enjoy drinks on the dock and live music by local musicians. Come and go as you please. Boat is fully enclosed and heated. Free. Wilmington Water Tours, 212 South Water Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 338-3134 or www.wilmingtonwatertours.net.

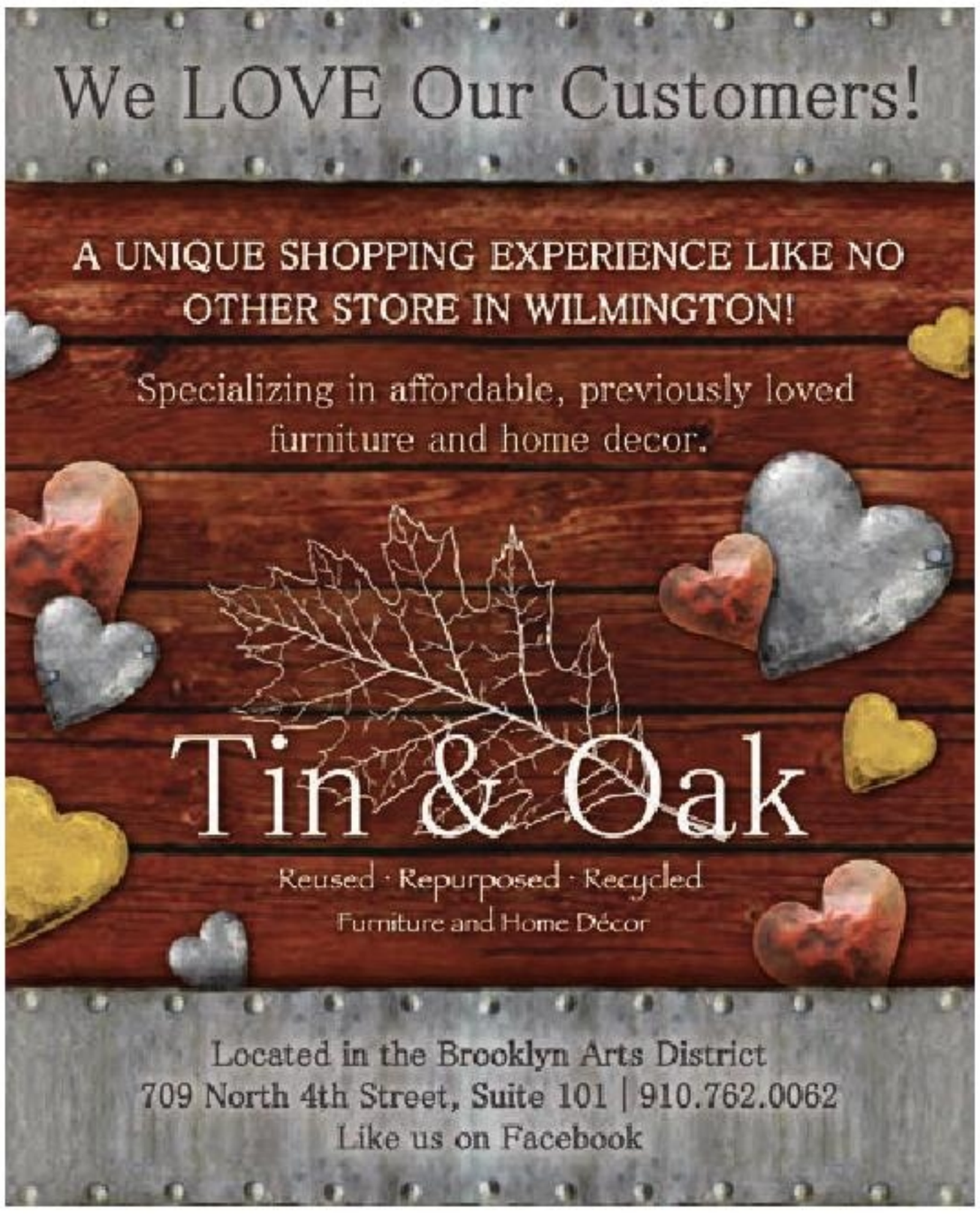
Sunday Guided Meditation

10–11 a.m. Energy clearing meditation led by Energy Healer Jennifer Chapis. Suggested exchange: $15. Exhale Yoga and Wellness Studio, 16 South Front Street (enter in alley), Wilmington. Info: www.alllovehealing.com.

Sunday Black History Film Festival

2–4:30 p.m. Film festival honoring outstanding African-American film directors, with a film screening each week. 2/1: *The Learning Tree* (Gordon Parks); 2/8: *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (Ossie Davis); 2/15: *Down in the Delta* (Maya Angelou); 2/22: *Bamboozled* (Spike Lee). Free. NHC Main Library, 201 Chestnut Street, Wilmington. Info: (910) 798-6323 or www.nhclibrary.org.

To add a calendar event, please contact Ashley at ashley@saltmagazinenc.com. Events must be submitted the first of the month, one month prior to the event.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N.C. WRITER'S Notebook

By Sandra Redding

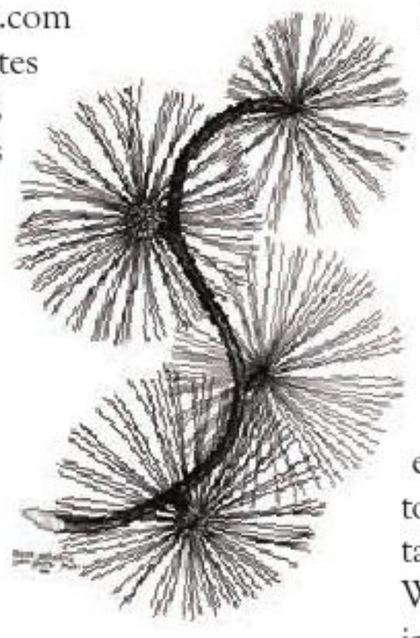
I love Mickey Mouse more than any woman I have ever known.
— Walt Disney

Literary Events

Marriage is a romance in which the heroine dies in the first chapter.
— Cecilia Egan, Author

February 14 (Saturday, 1 p.m.). Heart of Carolina Romance Writers Meeting (Mecklenburg County chapter of Romance Writers of America), Bond Park Community Center, Concord. On Valentine's Day, scribes of love will meet the most important man in their lives — AN AGENT. Membership info: carolinaromancewriters.com

February 21 (Saturday). *O.Henry* magazine celebrates writers at the O.Henry Hotel, Greensboro. Book Fair, 1–3 p.m., with local authors selling and signing books published in 2014. Night of the Literary Stars dinner gala, 6:30 p.m., with *O.Henry* editor Jim Dodson emceeing Wiley Cash, Clyde Edgerton, Frances Mayes and Jill McCorkle. Info: www.ohenrymag.com



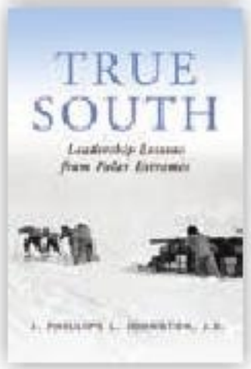
March 26–29. 2015 Palustris Festival, Southern Pines, Pinehurst and Aberdeen. Sponsored by the Arts Council of Moore County and the Wells Fargo Foundation, Palustris (the Latin name for longleaf pine) is the annual celebration of visual, literary and performing arts. While in the area stop by The Country Bookshop. Info: Palustrisfestival.com

July 5–9. Writers Workshop, Wildacres Retreat, Little Switzerland. This nationally renowned workshop, organized by Judi Hill of Greensboro, combines an awe-inspiring setting with unique learning experiences for prose and poetry writers. Fills quickly; reserve a spot early. Info: wildacreswriters.com

Contest Winners and Publications

Asking a working writer what he thinks about critics is like asking a lamppost how it feels about dogs.
— Christopher Hayston, Actor and Writer

John Thomas York, Greensboro poet and teacher, received the 2014 Linda Flowers Literary Award for his essay, *Oh, Beautiful Bug.* Presented by the North Carolina Humanities Council, the honor includes a cash prize plus stipend for residency at Weymouth Center for the Arts and Humanities in Southern Pines.



A bouquet of roses to Grace Ocasio, performing artist and poet of Charlotte, who recently received a N.C. Arts Council Regional Artist Grant and published her first poetry collection, *The Speed of our Lives.*

Prefer Romance or Mystery? In her latest novel, *Breaking Out*, Mary Flinn of Summerfield combines both genres.

In *True South: Leadership Lessons from Polar Extremes*, J. Phillips L. Johnston of High Point supports his formula for success with historical examples of survival.

Edited by Marianne Gingher of Greensboro, *Amazing Place: What North Carolina Means to Writers* contains twenty-two engaging essays by authors from the mountains to the sea. Read this one and you'll understand why word scribes love calling North Carolina home.

Writing Lesson

Most of my books start with a place, then a person. The two have to be together. The place shapes the person.
— John Ehle, N. C. Novelist

Nicholas Sparks of New Bern tops the nation's list of popular romance writers. Beginning with *The Notebook*, published in 1996, he has penned eighteen novels, all best-sellers. His worldwide sales exceed 97 million copies. Twelve of his novels have been adapted to successful films.

Despite such phenomenal success, some reviewers still label his books purple prose. Fans, mostly women, disagree. They delight in reading about ordinary people making extraordinary sacrifices for those they love. They enjoy, too, the vivid sense of place he creates. Most of his books take place along the tranquil coastline of North Carolina. Writing about what he knows, Sparks lives in New Bern and is currently producing a film in Wilmington. A writer who gives back, he has donated millions to charity and offers tips to aspiring writers on his website, nicholassparks.com.

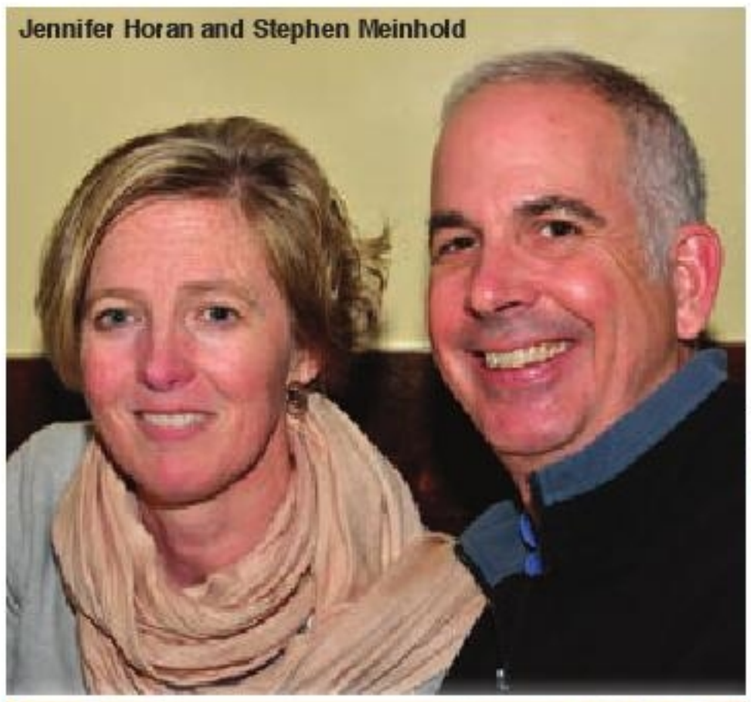
Want to visit Sparks' world? Guided walking, bicycle and trolley tours are available in New Bern. Plus, Sparks fans living in Guilford, Randolph and Alamance counties will be able to hop aboard a Holiday Tours bus for a trip that will explore the author's haunts in New Bern, Rose Hill and Screen Gems Studio in Wilmington. During the ride, films based on the author's books will be shown. Info: nicholassparks.com.

Happy Hearts & Flowers Day! Do keep me posted on writerly happenings.
sanredd@earthlink.net

Greensboro writer Sandra Redding's novel, Naomi Wise: A Cautionary Tale, *is a riveting story about heartbreak and hope in a Quaker Community.*

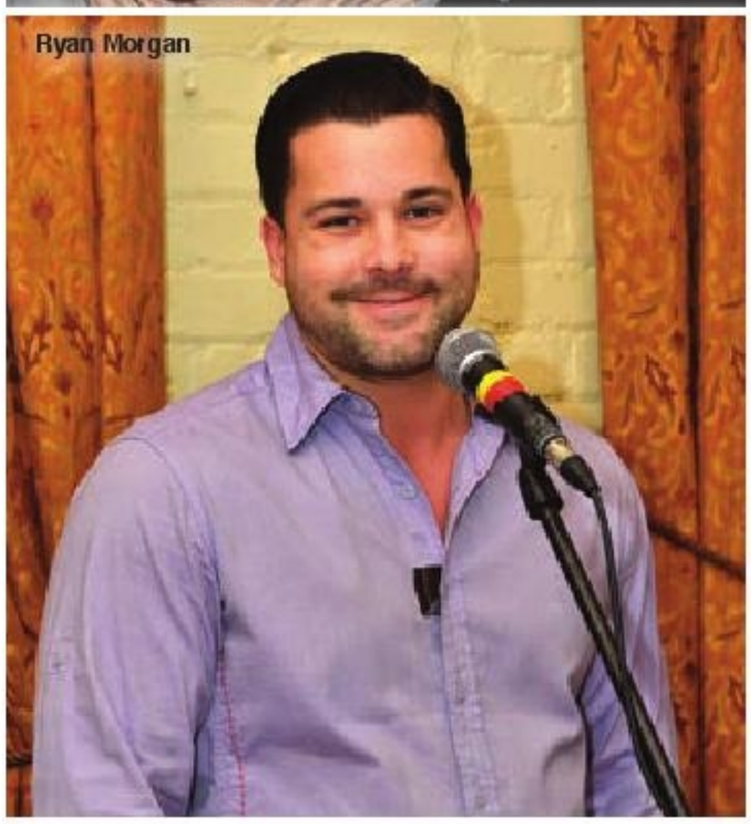
Port City People

Wild Turkey Bourbon Tasting and Social
Front Street Brewery
Wednesday, January 14, 2015
Photographs by Bill Ritenour


Jennifer Horan and Stephen Meinhold

Kevin Kozak, Eddie Russell, Chris Levesque

Daniel Allen, Stephanie Gilbert


Ryan Morgan

Oscar & Charlene Alatorre, Beth Ann Hillman, Erin Marriott, Samantha & Lam Nguyen

Kelsie Cole, Kevin Kozak

Ann Maureen, Gary Cargill

Judi & Tom Hurley, Marena & Glen Brons

Jarod & Katie Fornes

Bob Rieber, Bill Bailey

Brian & Christi Wert

Port City People

4th Annual "Rip the Runway" Scholarship Event

Riverside Hilton Hotel

Saturday, January 10, 2015

Photographs by Bill Ritenour

Jimmy Willis, III

Evan Cherry

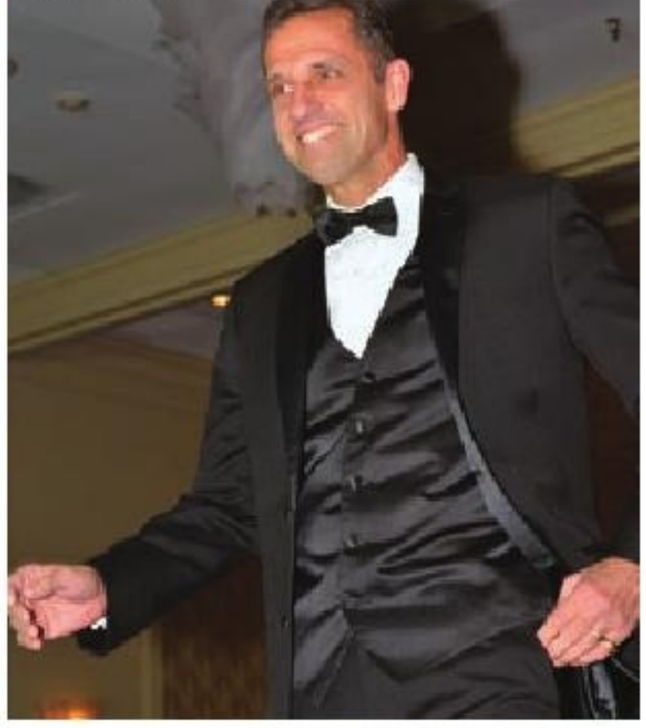
Mackenzie Nelson

London Jenkins

Hollis Briggs, Jr.

Dr. Diane Emerson

Emily Dixon


Ed McMahon

Frances Weller

T'Keyah Moore

Rhonda Bellamy

Silvea Johnson

Port City People

MLK Jr. Celebration Gospel Concert
Williston Middle School
Tuesday, January 13, 2015
Photographs by Bill Ritenour

The Love Factory Choir with Pastor George Maize IV of The Love Factory Church

Marcus Nixon

Ian Davis

Valerie Galloway

Kevin Green

George Maize III

Stephanie Ringwald

Port City People

Jazz at the CAM
Cameron Art Museum
Thursday, January 8, 2015
Photographs by Bill Ritenour

Travis Slaughter

Max Levy

Dwaine Gunnels

Primus Robinson, Jimmy Johnson

Simone Allen, Betty Booker

The Hawaiian Shirts

Love is in the House

February's stars

By Astrid Stellanova

Love, Star Children, is what February is all about, and love just happens to be Astrid's favorite topic. Let's talk about love, make love and think love. A little naked guy named Cupid has my full attention. I concentrated on love connections and nothing else, and here's what the stars say: Be grateful. Take nothing for granted. Love may be just that simple.

Aquarius (January 20–February 18)

I've gotta hand it to Aquarius. Despite all evidence to the contrary, you believe in love and keep committing to it. (I keep telling you: Jennifer Aniston, Oprah and Ellen DeGeneres are famous Aquarians.) Do I advise you to look before leaping? I surely do, but even if I did, you wouldn't listen. And you leap so gracefully, Sugar. The arms of some stranger are always open to you because you are so attractive and ready to love. Keep leaping; keep loving — that is just how you are made. Protect that heart just a wee little bit and hold something back — because you give more than you probably have ever taken.

Pisces (February 19–March 20)

Grandpa claims that time wounds all heels. He was looking straight at Beau when he said it, too. Beau ignored him and flashed his pearly whites. Melted me, naturally. Beau has a lot of Piscean traits — think Justin Bieber, another Pisces. Pisces can charm the birds from the trees and worry later about how to take care of them or where to buy bird seed. You inflict more wounds than you receive so quit your bitching. Somebody in your life is needing some love; unconditional, true love. Give it up, Buttercup.

Aries (March 21–April 19)

If you could stop trolling the Internet, you might just find the love of your life is standing right in front of you at the 7-Eleven drinking a giant Slurpee. Or, you might fall back in love again with that freckle-faced thing you dated in high school that keeps showing up wherever you go. Life is like this, my hard-headed Ram, and you sometimes don't see what *is* just because you are so dazzled by other possibilities. Pay attention, Honey, and discover the sweetness right there in your own cup.

Taurus (April 20–May 20)

If a simple flat tire didn't flap you so much, you might recognize Mother Nature threw a wrench in the works just to stop you from blasting right past something important. Go back — what did you miss the first time around, Child? The stars point to the fact that this is a month that is going to demand you pay attention. You have been in high gear since the New Year, and yet notice you wind up in the same place you started. Somebody is trying very hard to make contact with you, and you are going to have to stop to notice. You are one lucky bull — and the world is really your pasture.

Gemini (May 21–June 20)

The life lesson facing you has more to do with opening yourself up to love than to finding the right person to love. You are naturally magnetic, with all the pull of twins — usually feeling you are pulled in equally opposite directions. (Think evil twin, good twin, and that's what you're up against.) The bigger challenge for you remains trust. Let it go, Baby. You ain't frozen, are you? You are wasting a lot of time convincing yourself you have been wronged, when in fact, you have been luckier than the average. A very interesting (read that *happy*) coincidence of the heart is about to hit you right slap in the head — or somewhere lower.

Cancer (June 21–July 22)

Steal for the third base and run like hell. You have got some formidable opponents behind you, but you are faster and craftier. The last time I saw a chart like yours I would have sworn it would be the perfect time to buy a lottery ticket. But then, I been buying 'em for about twenty years and I guess you already know I ain't rich, unless you count being rich in love. You have got one piece of unfinished business trailing you. Say I'm sorry like you mean it, Honey. All will turn out just fine in the love department.

Leo (July 23–August 22)

Yes, you deserved better, and no, you didn't get it last month. But here's a second chance. The stars are right for you to finally resolve a festering problem with a family member. This is a boil that needs to be opened, Honey. Be the bigger person. Also, forgive your mother. She did the best she could. If you get this family stuff sorted out, you can get your love house in order. Surprise someone with a little sweet treat. Make it chocolate if you want some action — and let's be honest. Who doesn't?

Virgo (August 23–September 22)

Somebody close to you is so persuasive that he could talk you into a spa week in Windblow. Seriously, Honey, you need some objective distance from this snake charmer. But what you don't need is distance from someone who has carried a torch for you since grade school. They are a lot better looking than they used to be, and twice as nice. Just don't revisit your school album — their nose finally fits their face. And you two fit right into the same cozy frame.

Libra (September 23–October 22)

This is a year that you might as well treat like the gift that it is. Mysteries are resolved, enemies vanquished and property you lost will be restored. What's the price of all this good luck? Gratitude, Honey Bun. If you keep thanking the Universe, you will keep reaping the good karma coming to you. What else do you need to know? You are very, very lucky in love and get as much as you give. Yum!

Scorpio (October 23–November 21)

You love romance, and think this world is one big old Turner Movie Classic. It ain't, Darling. But there is plenty of opportunity for you to be the giver this month. You tend to be passive and wait for it to get heaped onto your plate; return the favor or make the first move. Somebody you know is starved for a little affirmation and sweet honey. Get ready for your close up, cause you will win more invitations and dinner dates than you can handle this month.

Sagittarius (November 22–December 21)

There are two unusually good-fortune days coming this month. One just happens to be Valentine's Day. Make some special plans, and show someone who cares you feel the same way. By special plans, I ain't meaning Joe's Diner or the drive-in either. Your long-time love has never forgotten how special you made them feel. You may not feel you deserve all the affection you get, but, Honey, you sure do get.

Capricorn (December 22–January 19)

It's a good time for you to make a list of all the things you want to change about yourself, not about your neighbor. Take stock of your own self, Honey, and stop being so critical. If you do that, some very interesting love developments are lining up and you won't blow the chance you are about to get. Be especially aware of your surroundings on the 19th. And do something sweet for a total stranger — good karma is worth banking.

For years, Astrid Stellanova owned and operated Curl Up and Dye Beauty Salon in the boondocks of North Carolina until arthritic fingers and her popular astrological readings provoked a new career path.

Circles

In a world full of sadness and suffering, it's the small circles we draw around friends, family, neighbors – even complete strangers at a school band concert – that put the heart at ease

By Clyde Edgerton

Sometimes it's hard to get a handle.

When we draw a mental circle around the wide world, that drawn circle encompassing beheadings, bombings, shootings, torture, disease, greed and storms – it's hard to find any promise in tomorrow. We look at all that's in that big circle, and we look around some more, and we may seem to have no choice but to be unhappy, sad, depressed. We may become quiet and cynical.

But sometimes in the midst of world sorrows and dangers we, for one reason or another, find a reason to draw a much smaller circle – one that is around a few people, say in a room or in an auditorium. That happened to me the other night when I attended a middle school band concert at Williston Middle School. I was sad about the world, but at the same time I needed to be at this event for my son's first band concert. I needed to watch and listen to him play trombone with other young musicians. What I didn't realize is that he was there for me, too. To make art for the world, that is. The rest of the band and the people in the audience were there for me, too, I soon found out.

I wouldn't have gone to a concert on my own; I wouldn't have ventured into that concert setting without my son being involved. I was forced to draw a smaller circle around all the people in that auditorium – just them. And inside that small circle I could draw a very small circle around any musician on stage. (Any one that I could see, that is. My son, it so happened, was out of sight in the rear of the band.)

I could draw a circle around a clarinet player up front, and I could see, in her face, hope and happiness in her moment of making music – of joining with others in making artful sounds.

Glancing left and right at faces of parents, grandparents, friends, siblings – differing colors, classes, backgrounds, hurts, comforts – I saw flashes of pride, moments of remembering, nods, smiles, the diminishing of sorrow and loss, the awareness that a bunch of young people were up on stage, intent on putting all the right notes in the right places, and all the silences in the right places. To give pleasure.

Yes, there's that great, big circle around a world, a universe of chaos and death, a world that can bring paranoia and fear. And then there are smaller circles – around the kind of universe that resides inside the circle surrounding a room where people are not intent on hurting, are less afraid for an hour or so, are focused on enjoying art, enjoying some eternal spring of sounds made by young Americans.

Circles can be smaller and smaller and smaller. Around the mysterious universe that's inside a single person. You can draw a circle around that single person, be it you or your partner, or around the two of you together – and in that case the circle may look a bit like a heart, like a Valentine. Happy February. Draw circles close to home.

Clyde Edgerton is the author of ten novels, a memoir and a new work, Papadaddy's Book for New Fathers. *He is the Thomas S. Kenan III Distinguished Professor of Creative Writing at UNCW.*

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